# The New Criterion

December 1991

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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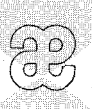

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# The New Criterion *December 1991*

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**Roger Kimball**'s book, *Tenured Radicals*, is now available in paper from Harper-Perennial.

**Samuel Lipman**'s essay is adapted from a speech he delivered in Appleton, Wisconsin, earlier this fall on the occasion of the dedication of the Ruth Harwood Shattuck Hall of Music at Lawrence University.

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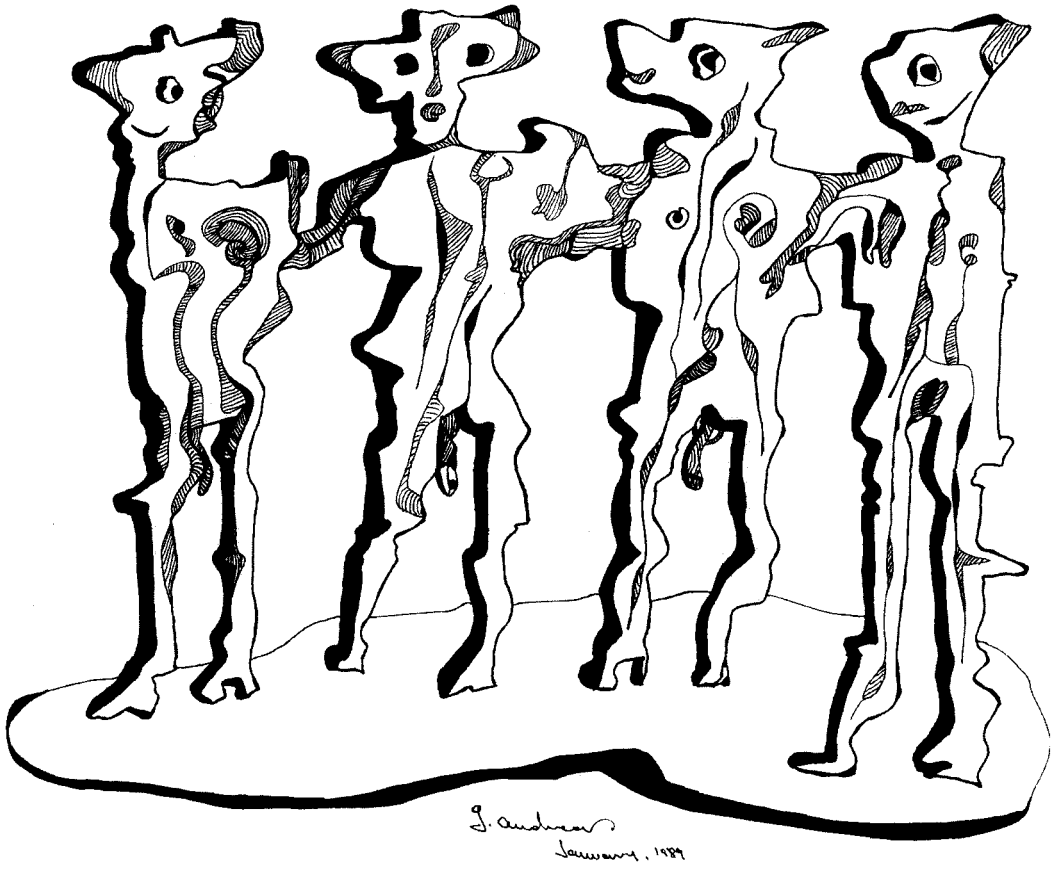

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# Notes & Comments: December 1991

## *"Oh, happy day" I*

It is sometimes claimed by liberals and leftists in the academy that recent attacks upon the way the teaching of the humanities has been politically corrupted in our universities either are much exaggerated—meaning: there is no cause for alarm, everything is pretty much the same as it was—or are written from what are called "political motives." Thus, Louis Menand, who teaches English at Queens College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, complains in a recent issue of *The New York Review of Books* about "indiscriminate attack[s] on academic thought from political motives," quite as if his own blistering attack on David Lehman's *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* —the book ostensibly under review in his very long piece—had nothing whatever to do with "political motives." It is also Professor Menand's view that "many assaults on the university by people who are outside it [do not] distinguish among different tendencies in contemporary academic thought; [do not] understand the purpose of theoretical inquiry; and [lack] historical perspective."

Yet something very odd occurs in the course of Professor Menand's attempted demolition of *Signs of the Times*. When, after fifteen columns of type and thirty-one footnotes, this academic in good standing comes to his final sentence, he writes: "Although I think his complaint is ineptly made, I believe that Lehman is right in feeling that academic literary study has lost its way." So there *is* something rotten going on, and while those outside the universities cannot be trusted to tell us what it is, those inside the universities will keep their mouths shut until the alarms and attacks can no longer be safely ignored. We wonder if this is what Professor Menand means when he writes that people outside the universities do not "understand the purpose of theoretical inquiry"?

## *"Oh, happy day" II*

Or does Professor Menand have something like the following in mind when he reserves for those within the academy the gift for understanding theoretical inquiry? We quote in their entirety the last two paragraphs from *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction, and the Law* (Routledge, 1991) by Drucilla Cornell, professor at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law and visiting scholar at the Institute of Advanced Study:

> The affirmation of the feminine may be impossible as other than the reversion to the old stereotypes. Undecidability cannot be wiped out in an appeal to knowledge if there is no on-



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tological given to the feminine we can appeal to as our truth. We cannot know for sure, "Yes this is definitely different. Now we are affirming Woman as other than the signifier of their desire." But the possibility that we might be approaching a new choreography of sexual difference with every new step we take can also not be wiped out. The unexpected pleasure of the Other who remains with us, who keeps up the pace, is always a possibility. Affirmed as the feminine, the threshold might be the opening to a new alliance. This is what [Luce] Irigaray seeks to protect: the possibility that feminine difference performs against phallogocentrism in the name of the Other. As we have seen, this performance is affirmed as performance, not as a mere description of what woman is. But as performance, its evocation is explicitly utopian. The utopia is precisely one in which the Other is other not just as male/female, but as singular, particular. The dream of a new choreography of sexual difference is not mere repetition of heterosexuality; it is instead the sexuality lived as love that must be premised on the truly "hetero," the Other, the beyond to our current system of gender identity in which difference is always reduced to the same gender divide with conventional "heterosexuality." Such a new choreography may be asking for the moon, but through asking for the moon, we speak and write.

Ontology of gender identity, then, has been deconstructed not just to expose the normative injunction that lies at its base, but to protect the possibility of a different destiny. Oh, happy day.

Professor Cornell's book carries the following endorsement from Professor Stanley Fish of Duke University, another academic who firmly believes that it is only academics like himself who are qualified to pass judgment on writing of this kind:

> Drucilla Cornell is the most intellectually sophisticated legal academic writing on these issues today. The philosophical rigor she brings to any question along with the strong imagining of human needs and aspirations makes her contribution to current debates unique and valuable.

*Oh, happy day?*

## *The PC line on censorship*

Anyone needing a refresher course in just how grim things have become in the chic precincts of the academic art establishment is invited to inspect the Fall 1991 number of the *Art Journal*, the first of two issues to be devoted to the subject of—censorship. Not so long ago, of course, this would have been an unlikely subject for an art journal. But ever since the controversy over federal funding for exhibitions of Robert Mapplethorpe's brutalizing photographs of sado-masochistic behavior erupted a couple of years ago, little cries of "censorship" have filled the air like the buzz of locusts wherever politically correct intellectuals and artists congregate. Moreover, it soon became clear that this chorus was determined to construe "censorship" so broadly that anyone denied government largesse could claim to be a victim of oppression. It is not surprising that the *Art Journal*—an official organ of the College Art Association, the largest and most important academic organization of art teachers in the country—should come to function as a clearing-house for the orthodox position on such matters. Nor is it surprising that one of the two guest editors for this special issue should be Robert Storr, a recently appointed curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and, alas, an increasingly prominent source of those little buzzings.

Mr. Storr's own contribution to this issue begins with an essay entitled "Art, Censorship, and the First Amendment: This Is Not a Test." Buzz, buzz, buzz—you know the script: The United States is now in the grip of a fearsome right-wing effort to suppress free speech; artists are being muzzled everywhere. Presumably, even Mr. Storr must realize in his off-duty moments that



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there has never in history been a society in which artists and other citizens enjoy greater freedom from government censorship and social proscription than they do in late-twentieth-century America. All it takes is a stroll through the art galleries, a visit to the local newsstand, or a look at what's available on cable television these days to remind us that one thing we are not suffering from is too little freedom of expression.

But Mr. Storr's adherence to the imperatives of contemporary intellectual fashion requires that he ignore the evidence of his senses. "On every front," he writes, "legal challenges are being made to the freedom of serious artists, clever opportunists, dedicated amateurs, and ordinary people to represent the world as they see it." We wish that Mr. Storr could have cited one ordinary citizen, let alone one "serious artist," facing such "challenges": we would be there to take up the case beside him. But of course he adduced none because none exists. As it happens, the only area of our society in which free speech is seriously threatened today is the academy, where a wide range of politically unpopular opinion is regularly policed by *bien pensants* professors and administrators. Strangely enough, that phenomenon does not enter into Mr. Storr's analysis.

Instead, what Mr. Storr offers readers of the *Art Journal* is a species of grade-school absolutism in which anything less than total freedom is rejected as intolerable repression. Accordingly, his chief concern with the First Amendment turns on the license to utter dirty words in public. "In the final analysis, freedom of speech isn't so much a matter of when one may legally shout 'fire!' in a crowded theater but whether or not one may . . . yell 'Shit!' on stage in a publicly funded production—or 'fuck!'" We hope that MOMA's new curator found it exciting to write that sentence.

The stunning superficiality of Mr. Storr's performance is epitomized by his claim that "defending free speech depends on a willingness . . . to break taboos when and wherever they present themselves." It is worth pausing over this statement to contemplate what the nightmare of a society without taboos might be like. For Mr. Storr, however, respecting taboos is tantamount to "repressive decorum" and "general self-censorship." In order to illustrate what he has in mind by free speech, he returns to the case of Robert Mapplethorpe, the "transgressive artist." Among much else, Mr. Storr complains that the editor of *The New Criterion*, writing about the Mapplethorpe controversy in *The New York Times*, misled the public by not reproducing the offending photographs. Never mind that the *Times*, rightly, would never have printed them. (Nor, it might be mentioned, has MOMA exhibited them, though perhaps that, too, will change under its new curatorial leadership.) In Mr. Storr's view, the failure to exhibit samples of Mapplethorpe's sado-masochistic pornography was an instance of "preemptive and accusatory squeamishness." To make up for the omission, he does us all the "courtesy" of reproducing in glossy exactness Mapplethorpe's notorious *X Portfolio*, which features half a dozen grisly images of sexual torture and degradation.

If the measure of art really were its capacity to offend—as Mr. Storr and so many like-minded champions of the moment are eager to assure us—then Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs would be masterpieces. But offensiveness is merely offensiveness, not an index of artistic quality. It is shocking and, indeed, repulsive that a mainstream academic journal should agree to publish those photographs. In the end, though, it is perhaps even more shocking and repulsive that the Museum of Modern Art should now employ curators whose idea of artistic liberty centers around blatant examples of sexual pathology and whose model of free speech is the permission to swear in public. We must be grateful that Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison could not have foreseen that their labors on behalf of freedom would one day result in such repellent travesties.



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# Lincoln Kirstein & the "aesthetic" generation

## *by Hilton Kramer*

Lincoln Kirstein (born 1907) is one of the most remarkable figures in the cultural history of the modern era, not only in the United States but anywhere, and the new collection of his writings, which has been edited by Nicholas Jenkins, is therefore certain to be of great interest in many respects.[1] If only for his role in bringing George Balanchine to America and founding the New York City Ballet, Mr. Kirstein would be guaranteed a place of high distinction in the annals of twentieth-century cultural life, but the scope of his achievements in the arts is far more extensive than that, of course. As a poet, as an editor, and as a writer in many fields—not only literature and dance but virtually all the visual and performing arts—he has made important and sometimes crucial contributions. He has been much involved, too, in the creation of institutions, in the codification of taste, and in the support of the artists he has believed in. He has been a patron and administrator as well as a critic, historian, and creator, and it is one of the virtues of this new *Lincoln Kirstein Reader* that it brings together a sizable sampling of Mr. Kirstein's essays in the various fields that have interested him as well as some of the autobiographical writings that illuminate the place these subjects have occupied in his own life. If the book does not finally tell us everything about Mr. Kirstein's extraordinary career—it omits, for example, his once famous attack on Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and the Museum of Modern Art, an institution that Mr. Kirstein himself helped to shape in its early days—it does nonetheless give us a rich account of his many-sided talents and accomplishments. No doubt there will sooner or later be other books to complete the complex story of this unusual life.

On the occasion of this excellent *Reader*, however, I think it may be important to recall that Mr. Kirstein belongs to a generation and a period that are nowadays but dimly understood by a good many of the people in the arts, including a good many critics and curators, who are their principal beneficiaries. In the title I have given these remarks on Mr. Kirstein and his period, I have called his the "aesthetic" generation, and I know very well that the word "aesthetic" is bound to cause dismay and distaste —even, alas, among some who have lived by it—for the aesthetic conception of art is now much under attack in discussions of art and culture. To its former association with a febrile aestheticism and the overcultivation of sensibility—in an essay on the photographs of Walker Evans in this book, Mr. Kirstein himself observes that "The development of sensibility for its own sake damned the 'nineties' as well as the 'twenties'"—has lately been added a virulent political campaign that has sought to discredit the concept of the aesthetic in the name of "di-

1 *By With To & From: A Lincoln Kirstein Reader*, edited by Nicholas Jenkins; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 423 pages, $30.



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versity," equality, and democracy. Yet, though the word "aesthetic" is now so battered by ideological assault and so disparaged by the orthodoxies that have supplanted it, there is finally no other way to describe the kind of vital interest that Mr. Kirstein and certain of his contemporaries brought to their endeavors in the arts. To surrender the word in the discussion of those endeavors is tantamount, in my view, to surrendering art itself to sheer demagoguery. Thus, if I have enclosed the word in quotation marks, it is as much to underscore its importance as it is to acknowledge the opprobrium that it has acquired in the current debate.

The figures I have in mind among Mr. Kirstein's contemporaries are a diverse lot, and they often differed a good deal about almost everything but their loyalty to an aesthetic standard of judgment in art, whether they used the word or not. Among them I would include Alfred Barr, Clement Greenberg, Virgil Thomson, R. P. Blackmur, A. Hyatt Mayer, B. H. Haggin, Edwin Denby, James Thrall Soby, Stark Young, Katherine Dreier, Carl Van Vechten, and Walker Evans—hardly an exhaustive list, but the first names that come to mind. Some were older than Mr. Kirstein. Blackmur and Van Vechten are acknowledged as mentors in this book. Some were younger. And behind all of them was a still older American generation that included Bernard Berenson, Albert C. Barnes, James G. Huneker, Duncan Phillips, Willard Huntington Wright, Montgomery Schyler, Walter Pach, and Henry McBride. Some of these figures came to reject modernist painting, as Mr. Kirstein eventually would. Some were its most ardent champions. But it was nonetheless over *aesthetic* issues that they differed, just as it was over an aesthetic issue—in this case, the aesthetic legitimacy of modernist painting—that Mr. Kirstein broke with the Museum of Modern Art in 1948. The arguments did not invoke political criteria as tests for the art to meet. There were plenty of others to do that, of course—especially in the 1930s when the champions of Midwestern regionalism, on the one hand, and the followers of the Communist Party line, on the other, joined in denouncing modernist art on political grounds—but this was not the kind of argument that emanated from the debates of the "aesthetic" generation itself. Theirs were essentially aesthetic disagreements that turned on the thorny issue of pictorial innovation and its relation to tradition. These disagreements were not finally susceptible to amicable resolution, yet even in the heat of controversy they had the effect of illuminating real artistic issues and did not, as a rule, take refuge in the kind of counterfeit debate that nowadays swamps almost all discussion of the arts.

I think Mr. Jenkins's *Reader* would have been even more interesting than it is—and a shade less pious, too—if he had confronted this issue directly by reprinting "The State of Modern Painting," which Mr. Kirstein published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1948. This article caused an immense sensation at the time, for its dismissal of modernist painting was total and absolute—a declaration of what Mr. Kirstein himself identified as "a new opposition [which was] not conservative . . . [but] reactionary," and which especially denounced "improvisation as a method, deformation as a formula, and painting (which is a serious matter) as an amusement manipulated by interior decorators and high pressure salesmen." As Irving Sandler wrote in a reprise of this controversy:

> One would suppose that Kirstein meant Pollock or Rothko, but no, he had Léger and Matisse in mind—Matisse, "a decorator in the French taste, the Boucher of his epoch, whose sources in the miniatures and ceramics of Islam are, inch for inch, his superior."[2]

Among the painters Mr. Kirstein preferred to Matisse were David Alfaro Siqueiros, Pavel Tchelitchev, and Paul Cadmus—all

2 See Irving Sandler's introduction to *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.* (Abrams, 1986), pages 31-32.



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subjects of hagiographic essays reprinted in this *Reader*. Mr. Kirstein was also beating the drum in those days for a revival of nineteenth-century Salon painting. He was right, in other words, to characterize his taste in painting as "reactionary," and I think Mr. Jenkins would have done the readers of this *Reader* a service by giving them the details of this controversy.

It is mainly in his writings on photography and sculpture that Mr. Kirstein has excelled as a critic and historian of the visual arts. The essays on Walker Evans and Henri Cartier-Bresson, which are reprinted in the *Reader*, are rightly regarded as classics of the literature, and the monograph he devoted to Elie Nadelman, of which there is no trace here, is, in my view, a critical masterpiece. (As the original edition was small and expensive and is now unobtainable, it should be reprinted in a cheaper edition.)

Some of the best things in the *Reader* are, not surprisingly, Mr. Kirstein's writings on the ballet and on Balanchine in particular. Yet for some of us, anyway, his championship of the Balanchine ballet aesthetic involves a paradox. For Balanchine, with his faith in "the logic of movement" and his unquestioned belief, as he said, "in the dance as an independent category, as something that really exists in itself and by itself," was, in his own sphere of aesthetic endeavor, as much of a modernist as Matisse and a good deal of his achievement was as "pure" and "abstract" as the painting of Mondrian or Rothko. That Mr. Kirstein has never been able to appreciate this aesthetic resemblance, which is so obvious to a great many other people, must remain one of the mysteries of his career. It is as if he were determined to reserve for the art of painting all of the "literary" materials that Balanchine had eliminated from the art of ballet. Whatever the reason, where dance is concerned, Mr. Kirstein has remained an ardent modernist —whether he calls himself that or not— whereas in painting he is right to call himself a reactionary, and this paradox is writ large in Mr. Jenkins's *Reader*.

For anyone with a keen interest in modern literary history, the most interesting pages of the *Reader* are those devoted to *Hound & Horn*, the splendid magazine that Mr. Kirstein founded while still at Harvard in the late Twenties. As he now acknowledges, T. S. Eliot was the inspiration— "*The Criterion*, later *The Dial*, were models of what magazines might be," he writes, and "Eliot seemed to me, at the time, the most important authority in the world for anything and everything that could occupy me." Yet, he now confesses that

> . . . at a time when burgeoning "modernism" was a mandatory stance, my idiosyncratic models were Balzac's Lucien de Rubempré, Bulwer-Lytton's Pelham, and Benjamin Disraeli's Coningsby.

So the conflicted attitude toward modernism was there at the beginning, though it remained remarkably well concealed in the pages of *Hound & Horn*, and this may account for the slight air of condescension that colors Mr. Kirstein's memoir of the magazine, written nearly half a century later.

> I abandoned the magazine after seven years [he writes], not entirely because my interests had altered and I was otherwise magnetized (by the ballet). The real reason I did not fight to continue *Hound & Horn* . . . was that I didn't give a damn for politico-philosophical tendencies which I felt were devouring the magazine's space, and I was neither equipped to deal nor interested in dealing with them.

In the end, he writes, "The single piece prompted by myself which I feel does me most credit was a translation of some of the great *sura* of the Koran"—a strange epitaph, to say the least, to a great literary journal.

Some of the other pieces gathered in this *Reader* are now dated and even slightly embarrassing—the valentine to James Cagney, for example, and the really mawkish tribute to Marilyn Monroe ("She was a criterion of the comic in a rather sad world," etc.), which is as awful in its own way



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as the Andy Warhol "Marilyn" portraits.

But this is only to say that what I have called the "aesthetic" generation had its weaknesses as well as its strengths, and it was its strengths that gave us entrée to much of what we now understand to have been the real achievement of the arts in this century. The errors of judgment, the eccentric detours, the logrolling for friends and loved ones, even what Mr. Kirstein calls the "silliness," are easily forgiven—though they should not be forgotten—in the larger perspective of history. Compared to the cynical and destructive—or should one say deconstructive?—forces that have now commandeered the arts and their institutions in this last decade of the century, both the "aesthetic" generation and their immediate predecessors leave behind a clean smell and a proud record, and the best pages of this *Lincoln Kirstein Reader* are an important part of that record.



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# Music as a vocation

## *by Samuel Lipman*

What does it mean to be a musician in our time and in our place? What is to be the fate of music—serious, great music, timeless music—in our civilization? For reasons which I trust will become apparent, I want to take as my model in exploring these questions one of the most important humanistic statements of our century: the German sociologist Max Weber's lecture at the University of Munich more than seventy years ago, a lecture simply titled "Politics as a Vocation."[1] On that occasion in the winter of 1918-19, Weber spoke to Germany just after its defeat in World War I and at the beginning of a revolutionary movement modeled on the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia a year earlier. In a world torn apart by slaughter and the collapse of every social structure, in a world fated to bring forth new barbarisms in some ways more terrible than the old, Weber raised the question of politics as a possibly humane way of organizing society. Not the least of Weber's genius was that he understood that politics presupposes politicians, and that politicians differ importantly from one another in their function, behavior, motivation, and moral value.

My concern here in reflecting on "Music as a Vocation" is what Weber identified as the distinguishing features of the political vocation. I realize that it is impossible to do justice to Weber's profound and many-sided analysis of his subject on this occasion. But several points he made about politicians are relevant to the lives of musicians and lovers of music, and we can learn much even from what must necessarily be a summary of Weber's analysis. First and foremost, Weber separated politicians into those who live "off" politics and those who live "for" politics; in reading Weber, it is impossible not to feel that for him the true political leader is someone who lives in the main "for" politics rather than "off" it. He who has a vocation for politics bears personal responsibility for his actions; above all he must always be willing to fight for the cause for which he lives. Because he bears responsibility for his actions, a politician must ally his necessary passion to a sense of proportion. And above all, the possessor of the vocation for politics must be willing to struggle on in the face of the world's rejection.

Such is how Max Weber saw the political vocation. There are, of course, differences between politics and music. When Weber spoke about the vocation of politics in the cold winter of 1918-19, he spoke in a world bloody with murders past and murders looming in the future. When we speak at the present moment about the vocation of music, we speak in a time of unparalleled physical security and even what in many

1 The English translation of the Weber lecture I have used is in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford University Press, 1946).



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places seems like peace. Politics, in a word, is about life, and music is about art. But it is not just a witticism that life imitates art; we see all around us the power of art, low, high, and everywhere in between, to shape our image of our world and ourselves. And can any of us deny that, even as I have outlined it above, what I have just described as Max Weber's notion of the political vocation has uncomfortably much to say to us today in music?

Let me begin with Weber's formulation —substituting "music" for "politics"—of living "off" music as opposed to living "for" music. Here is the difference between the two meanings of the word "vocation": vocation as profession and vocation as calling; put a bit crassly, we are talking about the difference between earning our livings and dedicating our lives. This is in many ways a good time for living "off" music. There are more people employed in either writing, performing, teaching, administering, or marketing music than ever before in history; for the legions of the employed, compensation is also at an all-time high. As a body, those who earn their living by music are solidly middle-class, and a surprising number of those involved are rather more than middle-class. For the makers of great careers as conductors, instrumentalists, and singers, the road to fortune as well as fame is open. Musicians no longer sit below the salt; indeed, like the other members of our affluent society, musicians find that for reasons of prudence they cannot eat salt—or fat, that other symbol of prosperity—at all.

Nonetheless it must be observed that there are now grave signs of danger for the musical profession. For non-keyboard instrumentalists, despite—or perhaps because of—the high salaries involved, horror stories abound of hundreds of applicants for each opening in a major orchestra; again because of high wage costs, live music is under increasingly triumphant siege from the inhuman and inexpensive products of electronic keyboards and synthesizers. Perhaps even more important than these economic considerations, even where there are well-compensated and secure jobs in live music, player morale is now at an all-time low, as respect for both conductors and management touches bottom. Most American orchestras, including the greatest, are now experiencing smaller audiences for subscription series. The siren-song of pops concerts is loud in the land, and everywhere the cry in musical institutions large and small is earned income. Orchestral musicians, long used to being the playing cogs in a musical wheel, now find themselves cogs in an economic wheel as well. In a more rarefied world, a very few lucky violinists still manage to make solo careers; for young and attractive singers, there are still fortunately many opportunities in opera, but here youth and attractiveness is all, and few indeed can hope for long-term careers. In the case of solo pianists, the verdict can only be (quoting Max Weber's Dante reference in another lecture about the openings for Jews in science) *Lasciate ogni speranza*—"Abandon all hope." In teaching, that refuge of so many gifted musicians, job opportunities, already dwindling because of declining enrollments, are further restricted for many by the requirements of affirmative-action hiring policies.

There is certainly nothing wrong with making one's daily bread through the medium of an art one loves, and for which one lives. Indeed, at a time when we are hearing all this ersatz-romantic hogwash about the artist's implacable opposition to bourgeois society, we would do well to remind ourselves of Richard Strauss's comment in 1904 when he was criticized for conducting two concerts in Wanamaker's department store in New York: "True art ennobles any hall, and to earn money for wife and child is no disgrace to an artist."

But Strauss was a strong character indeed, and for almost all of us there are the important psychic costs attached to living "off" something. Most of us who have stayed the course—I would almost say all of us—came to music not because it was a living but because it was a life. As we see our colleagues and friends, our erstwhile comrades-in-



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arms, reduced to being employees in what we fear is a shrinking labor market, we cannot but question our past image of ourselves and the very integrity of our relationship to what we once so purely loved. Clearly, we are now forced to re-examine the entire notion of what we are doing in music and as musicians. Are we indeed special, as we had once thought, in our commitment and in our deep connection to what has also turned out to be our daily work?

And so we are led to the idea of what it now means to live "for" music. As I continue to repeat this phrase about living "for" music, I am conscious of how nostalgic, how quaint, even how reactionary the phrase sounds in this *fin-de-siècle* age, an age so different in its attitude toward music and the other arts from the *fin-de-siècle* age of a century ago. I think we all can understand the meaning of the word "for": to love music, as one of God's sublime creations for the benefit of man, with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all our might. It means to live by music; it means not just to think music but to think in music; it means to consecrate one's life to the service of music; it means music as a way of life. It does *not* mean that one must make a profession of music; still less does it mean that one who lives "for" music may not live in the world. It only means that music must come first, and last.

Though "for" as I have used it can be rather easily comprehended, I am not sure the same can be said for the word "music." The great music that it is our privilege to serve is a music of Western origin stretching from the Middle Ages to the present; though augmented and leavened by powerful streams from the East and Africa, our great music remains both the creation of the West and one of the finest, if not indeed the finest, flowering of Western civilization.

Living "for" music means hitching one's wagon to an ideal—an ideal of tradition, of achievement, of greatness. Inescapably, it increasingly means looking backward much of the time to the classics, as Beethoven and Brahms looked to Bach, Liszt and Wagner to Beethoven, Strauss to Liszt and Wagner, and Schoenberg to the entire, completed Western tradition. It means revering older music, older ways of performing that music, and older attitudes of respect and reverence to the very idea of musical masterpieces.

But in our society, amongst our academic elites of learning and amongst our merchants of culture, there is no agreement on what I have just said. We are told that to proclaim the Western musical tradition—to live "for" this music—is elitist, chauvinist, sexist, racist, and, by the lights of the new learning, ignorant. On all sides, we are told that we live in a time not of music but of musics, a time not of culture but of cultures, a time not of tradition but of traditions. We are told that Beethoven and scat are equal; as a matter of fact, a famous practitioner of scat singing now conducts orchestras in performances of Beethoven. We are told that the young have no patience with what is pejoratively called "classical" music. We are told that the young do not wish to concentrate on anything serious and heavy, that they wish to be entertained by sound-bites of this and that, artfully confected to keep short attention-spans occupied. We are told that the future of the string quartet, that sublime achievement of the nineteenth century, must be given over to punk-costumed performers of dribs and drabs of popular and avant-garde trivialities. We are told too that even such a masterwork as Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* can only be properly appreciated in our day when its production is set in the aesthetic and moral abyss of Trump Tower.

How, you may well ask, does Trump Tower get dragged into a discussion of *The Marriage of Figaro*? Why must lovers of chamber music concern themselves with the Kronos Quartet? Why should we worry about how—or whether—Bobby McFerrin conducts Beethoven? The answers to these questions come quickly: Peter Sellars, the Kronos Quartet, and Bobby McFerrin are, or are thought to be, successful with the young, that frightening apparition, flesh of our flesh, that we have brought to life and



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now must answer to. The young are about success, both sexual and economic; the old have said good-bye to what I might delicately call romance, and, in our society, have only to look forward to lives at once lengthened and all too often sickened. Put crassly, the young have the purchasing power, and our entire society, as part of its commitment to the twin human freedoms of democracy and capitalism, looks to the young for the artistic criteria, and the economic profits, of success. In music, as in all the other arts, the highest reality is the market; divining the tastes of the young is the all-consuming quest of the brightest and best minds in presentation, promotion, performance, and what now passes for creation.

How is this frenzied concern with the tastes of the young to be related to my earlier distinction between living "off" and living "for" music? Increasingly, living "off" music means filling the demands of the young, and living "for" music means pleasing only oneself, being relegated to a cloistered, hermetic, and ultimately quixotic life. Put another way, the conflict between living "off" music and living "for" music has become much more than moral and ethical: it has become generational. The distinction between "off" and "for" has become a conflict between the past and the present, and the old and the young.

This is the lesson to be drawn from the absurd efforts of several of our great symphony orchestras to do what they call "thematic" programming, to give every set or series of concerts a catchy and trivializing name, like the Minnesota Orchestra's "Tchaikovsky's Favorites," or the New York Philharmonic's "Variations on a Friday." This is also the lesson to be drawn from the way symphony orchestras are putting more and more of their efforts into mindless pops concerts, which, unlike the legendary efforts of the late Arthur Fiedler in Boston, no longer make any pretense to leading a new audience to great music; it is the lesson too to be drawn from the way classical-music radio stations now program individual movements rather than complete works. And in a world alas far beyond classic music, it is the lesson I draw from the policy statement made by Texaco in opening its current PBS "Great Performances" series with a dance program on music videos, featuring Paula Abdul and Michael Jackson.

No matter how all this selling-out is rationalized, it is living "off" music and art rather than "for" it. And so too, I am afraid, is all the concentration in our most famous schools on musicology rather than on music: not only is musicology in its origins often the product of diligence and pedantry but it now joins the burgeoning field of cultural studies in mounting an attack on the very legitimacy of the musical canon of greatness out of which musicology supposedly arose.

Let us recall that Max Weber spoke of the taking of personal responsibility for one's actions as a sign of the true vocation for politics. Here is perhaps the strongest argument for living "for" music, rather than simply "off" it. To play music that one knows is unworthy of one's love and ideals, just because money is bounteously available for the task; to recommend the meretriciously popular, just because a large paying audience can be assembled for its consumption; to boost the new, the shocking, and the trendy in music, just because funds are available for its presentation; to earn one's living as a teacher, but stand idly by as children are uneducated in great music, as they are uneducated in every other great art: all these developments are in the worst sense living "off" music rather than "for" it. All these developments are an abdication of the personal responsibility that music as a true vocation demands.

Not only must Weber's true politician, and our true musician, bear responsibility for his actions, but he must be ready at all times to fight for what Weber called "the cause." For those of us in music who most deeply feel our cause to be sacred, we will inevitably be reminded of Kant's categorical imperative: "I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law." The pure in



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heart and action will always be few, and even for them Weber's words about a politician requiring a sense of proportion should carry great weight. But a sense of proportion does not mean giving up; a sense of proportion means the wise application of principle to reality. Each of us in music must decide this issue as an individual, for only the individual can bear responsibility for his actions.

I shall conclude these reflections on music as a vocation by quoting Weber's moving words about the need to struggle on in the face of the world's rejection. But I also want to provide some hope in what may seem a bleak analysis. So before I end with Weber, I want to sketch my idea—and here again I can no more than sketch very briefly—of how we in music and especially in music education can live "for" music and at the same time live reasonably in the world.

We must, all of us, turn our efforts to a massive campaign on behalf of what used, unfairly, to be derogated as "music appreciation." By "music appreciation" I mean the presentation of masterpieces to the previously initiated, in an atmosphere that induces both love and understanding. At every level of school, in every concert hall and in every venue for music, we must make available to everyone, regardless of class or ethnicity, regardless of educational experience or family background, the greatest masterpieces of our musical tradition. We must not only make them available; we must do so, whether in live performance or on recordings, with every ounce of passion of which we are capable. We must present these masterpieces as worthy of the highest respect, and even reverence; we must demonstrate their centrality in civilization; we must make clear at every moment that it is to these masterpieces that we have dedicated our lives and our honor. We must realize that our goal in this new effort at music appreciation is not to make musicians or, God help us, to make scholars; it is to make music lovers. Everything in the work of musicians and of those who, through their support, make music possible must be directed toward this goal of music appreciation. Let me repeat: it is only through the love of great music, and the inspiring of that love in the young, that great music will survive in our time.

Now, in conclusion, I want to return to Max Weber. I would like to quote the last paragraph from "Politics as a Vocation," substituting, in every case, "music" for "politics."

> Music is a strong and slow boring of boards. It takes both passion and perspective. Certainly all historical experience confirms the truth —that man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible. But to do that a man must be a leader, and not only a leader but a hero as well, in a very sober sense of the word. And even those who are neither leaders nor heroes must arm themselves with that steadfastness of heart which can brave even the crumbling of all hopes. This is necessary right now, or else men will not be able to attain even that which is possible today. Only he has the calling for music who is sure that he shall not crumble when the world from his point of view is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer. Only he who in the face of all this can say "In spite of all" has the calling for music.

Applied to music, what Weber said is in fact a confession of love; it is the love of music that makes our music—and, I would add, music as a vocation—possible.



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# Géricault: the ideal and the real

*by Karen Wilkin*

Everyone knows about Géricault: the quintessential Romantic painter, *le peintre maudit*, the misunderstood rebel with the intense personal vision. Everyone knows about his brief, turbulent life: rejected by officialdom, admired by his colleagues, dead at thirty-three and instantly mythologized. But what do we know about his art? *The Raft of the Medusa*, of course. Thanks to that chapter in Julian Barnes's book we know a great deal about the shipwreck that inspired the painting and even about the way Géricault went about making his vast, chilling picture. (I recently ran across three people with no special interest in nineteenth-century French painting who all knew that Géricault had a survivor build him a scale model of the raft.) But what of the paintings, apart from the anecdotes?

*The Raft of the Medusa* remains mysterious, at once familiar and utterly surprising. It's always larger than you remember it and creepier, murkier, more Caravaggesque, and harder to see in the chancy light of the Louvre's Grande Galerie, through the waves of exhausted-looking tourists. And it's always better, more disturbing—a real *picture*, not just an icon. New Yorkers have had the occasional encounter with Géricault the past few years, most notably a wonderful little exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum celebrating its acquisition of a splendid, ambitious landscape, part of a well-documented group of three. But fascinating as the series is and good as the Met's painting is—the best of the trio, in fact—they are atypical paintings, not at all characteristic of Géricault's preoccupations. The question remains: what do we really know about his art?

Until the first week of January, the answer is to be found in Paris, in the comprehensive exhibition at the Grand Palais commemorating the bicentennial of Géricault's birth on September 26, 1791.[1] It's a perfectly stunning show, a lucidly organized, illuminating gathering of drawings, studies, paintings, prints, and sculpture that makes Géricault's presence as vivid as it must have been to his friends and colleagues during his all-too-short lifetime as an artist. Everything seems to be there, except one of the portraits of madmen (the one from the Winterthur Museum, which my knowledgeable sources say is "badly overpainted") and *The Raft of the Medusa*, too fragile to be moved but only a few Metro stops away, for ready comparison. The fully illustrated catalogue, with informative, exhaustive entries for each work, excellent comparative material, a scrupulously researched biography, and a selection of documents crucial to Géricault

1 "Géricault" opened at the Galeries nationales du Grandes Palais, Paris, on October 10 and will remain on view through January 6, 1992. A catalogue, by Sylvain Laveissière and Régis Michel with Bruno Chenique, has been published by Editions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux (409 pages, 350 FF paper).



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studies, is as comprehensive and, for the most part, as straightforward as the exhibition itself.

Part of the pleasure of the show and its catalogue is their underlying assumption that Géricault is a marvelous painter who speaks powerfully and directly to us two centuries later. He is not explicated, deconstructed, or forced to jump through political or sociological hoops. We are given enough of a context to judge Géricault's individuality—more about this later—and told enough about politics and events of the time to judge his response to them. The latter is an important consideration, since Géricault, like many of the innovative artists who succeeded him, sought his subject matter in dramatic current happenings, rejecting the remote classical past in favor of the actual present. The literate, even witty, didactic panels sparsely inserted in the exhibition —summaries of the catalogue text—give sufficient information for us to make sense of even the most obscure narrative images. Confronted by an enigmatic series of macabre drawings, for example, it helps to learn that they are about "l'affaire Fualdes," the gory execution-style murder of a hated petty official that shocked the French public of 1817; Géricault, fascinated, considered and abandoned the grisly crime as the theme of a large canvas. (Yes, that *is* a pig in the first sketch.) Similarly, a brief summary of French reaction to Napoleon's losses and eventual defeats adds another layer of meaning to Géricault's sombre *tours de force*, those oddly unheroic battle paintings, *The Chasseur of the Guards* (1812, Musée du Louvre) and *The Wounded Cuirassier* (1814, Musée du Louvre). The inclusion of the rhetorical, theatrical *Equestrian Portrait of Joachim Murat, King of Naples* (1812, Musée du Louvre) by Baron Gros, the "official" painter of Napoleonic heroes and victories, acts as an ironic foil for Géricault's moody counterparts. With such telling oppositions, rather than with text, the exhibition encourages the paintings and drawings to create their own stirring impressions.

This is not to say that the organizers of the show do not have a thesis. They do, but it seems deduced from the testimony of the art, not preconceived and imposed. Briefly, the curators maintain that Géricault's evolution, if one can say that of a career as brief and concentrated as his, was a struggle between the classicism promulgated as the ideal of the period and his own keen sense of actuality. In the course of presenting the abundant visual evidence for this notion, the show also examines the Géricault myth and explodes a good deal of it. The Géricault legend calls, in part, for a misunderstood genius, largely self-taught, free of the pernicious influence of the classicizing Academy. The show's introductory section, which sets Géricault's juvenile works among those of the leading artists of his formative years, makes the standards and the dominant aspirations of the period instantly clear. It makes it equally evident that the "autodidacte" had a firm grounding in the conventions of early-nineteenth-century painting. Géricault's first teacher, one of a group of remarkably minor painters responsible for his art education, described in the catalogue as "maniaque de l'Antiquité," spent much of his life drawing from antique sculpture. His next teacher was a painter of horses —"maniaque de cheval"—as convinced of the importance of equine anatomy as his colleague was of the overwhelming formal significance of Greek statues. (An engaging study that tests how many back ends of horses can fit on a canvas bears witness to his pupil's own enthusiasm for horseflesh.) When Géricault entered the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, in 1811, he enrolled in the studio of yet another "maniaque de l'Antiquité," following a course of study that sought appropriate images for themes from mythology and ancient history in Greek and Roman prototypes.

Seeing Géricault's early work amid that of his teachers and contemporaries not only emphasizes how much he was shaped by his times, but makes his originality unmistakable. It's plain from the start that he was incapable of the glacial sleekness of the ap-



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proved Neoclassical manner, even when he made efforts to conform to its conventions. The most academic of his life studies is marked by a rebellious vigor. When Géricault adopts poses derived from familiar antique sources they are transformed, becoming diagrams of tension instead of expressions of classical harmony. Géricault's figures never simply stand. They brace themselves against the ground, as if about to hurl themselves into violent action. A flickering chiaroscuro disrupts, rather than enhances, the modeling of forms, in contrast to the seamless shading of orthodox Neoclassicism. Michelangelo (and Mannerism in general) seem more at the root of Géricault's style than Greece and Rome, while his staccato rendering of musculature sometimes even seems to point ahead to Cézanne.

The gap between the young painter's gifts and the expectations of his teachers and colleagues is even more evident in the copies Géricault made in the Louvre (before he was barred from the premises for rowdy behavior), and when the original is hung beside the copy, as it is several times in the exhibition, his rough-hewn individuality is palpable. He was, not surprisingly, more successful at copying Titian than Raphael, clearly preferring Titian's dramatic lighting, broad paint-handling, and dynamically unbalanced compositions to Raphael's pellucid light, smooth transitions, and elegant symmetry. He did well, too, when he copied Caravaggio, for similar reasons. It's clear, though, from even the most faithful of these efforts that the aspiring young painter was not striving for accuracy but rather struggling to interpret work that challenged and interested him. In general, Géricault's copies are far rougher and more intensely colored than the paintings that inspired them; figures expend more effort, twist more in space, hold themselves more tensely. It's apparent even in a marvelous comparison that places a Géricault copy of a Titian entombment beside a slightly later Delacroix version of the same painting; the Delacroix, for all its individuality, is closer to the original. Géricault declares himself from the beginning: pugnacious, stubborn, talented in ways unmeasurable by the standards of the day, tightly wound, and *young*. His determination to extract the maximum drama from every composition is part of his strength, but it can also constitute a weakness. That copy of the Titian entombment, for example, falls apart because Géricault emphasizes the contrast of light and dark to the point where forms simply refuse to cohere.

Géricault may have resisted the usual standards for painting in the early nineteenth century, but his large equestrian portraits of soldiers, the *Chasseur* and the *Wounded Cuirassier*, won him a certain amount of attention at the Salons of 1812 and 1814, and praise that may have furthered his resolve to compete for the Rome Prize of 1816. It was an important competition, perhaps the most important. Winning not only permitted a young painter an extended period at the French Academy in the Giardini Borghese, studying antiquity firsthand, but it virtually assured him a successful career and profitable public commissions. Géricault was knocked out in the early rounds, which is easily explained by comparing his lively, almost casual preparatory drawings with the slippery, classically correct painting that took the prize. But he went to Italy anyway, on an ambitious year-long tour that took him to Florence—he drew Michelangelo's Medici Tombs—and to the great Doric temple complex at Paestum, as well as to Rome, Tivoli, and all the other places a Rome Prize winner would have gone. He dutifully drew from the antique, sketched paintings by Raphael and Leonardo, among others, and generally pursued the prescribed course of study for an ambitious young painter of the time, but he was also powerfully attracted to modern-day Italy, drawing feverish images of cattle and horse markets, a public beheading, crowds of ecstatic worshipers, groups of peasants, and the like. What fascinated him most, however, was the race of riderless horses, the stampede down the Corso, from Piazza del Popolo to Piazza



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Venezia, that was the culmination of the Roman Carnival.

More precisely, he was transfixed not by the race itself, but by the moments just before the horses were let loose, when young men struggled to hold the plunging beasts in check. It was a subject ready made for Géricault—violent action, a tangle of horses and bodies, imminent excitement. The exhibition's thesis—the battle between the antique ideal and the real—is perhaps most eloquently served by the works in this section, where it is clear that Géricault is trying to filter his vivid impressions of a present-day spectacle through his knowledge of classical relief sculpture, and that actuality is winning. Yet in the end, it is the Louvre's version of *The Riderless Horse Race: La Mossa* (1817), informed equally by Poussin and Roman images of the Dioscuri (Castor and Pollux, the Horsetamers), that proves the most memorable, and not the more anecdotal and vernacular versions in the museums of Lille and Avignon and the Walters Art Gallery, in Baltimore. In the shallow, claustrophobic space of the Louvre's picture, horses and grooms appear fragmented, as much by abrupt shifts of light and dark as by their audacious poses, a restless background for the firm triangular shape formed by the straining horse and groom closest to us. Yet far from stabilizing the action, this group becomes an emblem of contained energy, a sign for dynamic compression, a tight wedge about to explode. The intense highlight on the flank of the horse to the right adds to this dynamism, wrenching us away from the central figures and thrusting us back into the confusion of the middle ground. Géricault's dry, rather nervous brushwork adds to the sense of drama.

The series seems to be about barely disciplined energy more than anything else, about the raw power of the unbroken horses and the single-minded exertions of the grooms. Like many of Géricault's works, such as the energetic studies of equestrian soldiers and blacksmiths at work, or of fantastic Arab cavaliers, the Roman-horserace paintings suggest that his time with the horse painter, at the start of his education, was more useful to him—and probably more to his liking—than his exposure to high-minded Academicism. That astonishing picture in the National Gallery, London, *Horse Frightened by Lighting*, could alone be proof of that. What an extraordinary idea: a picture of the emotions of an animal. Even more astonishing is the inwardness of the picture. The horse doesn't rear or kick, but draws slightly backward, into itself, rigid against the blue-black sky.

Ultimately, it is not subject matter but the sense of light and dark as almost tactile forces, in drawings and paintings alike, that sets Géricault's Italian works apart. In the drawings, particularly, patches of tone function more as carriers of dramatic feeling than as evocations of the brilliant sunlight of Italy. As in that early copy of Titian and in *The Raft of the Medusa*, light acts almost independently of form, playing on our moods without necessarily offering us much factual information. Light and dark become abstract equivalents for emotion, evoking the inner, the invisible, and the intangible, like the horse's fear or the mingled despair, madness, and hope of the survivors of the wreck of the *Medusa*. As the exhibition unfolds, it becomes plain that such tempestuous feelings were Géricault's true subject matter, the source of a deep-rooted Romanticism, in spite of the evident competition of both classical style and realist observation for ascendancy in his art. The curators acknowledge this, in the section of the show devoted to portraiture. "Painting Thought" they call it, and direct our attention to Géricault's ability to render introspection, offering as evidence the series of masterpieces probably painted between 1819 and 1822, the so-called "Portraits of Madmen." (Never mind that two of the five subjects are women.)

These tightly focused portraits of "monomanes," people with particular obsessions, may have been commissioned specifically to illustrate psychological theories of the period, but whatever their origin, the pic-



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tures are unforgettable; the subjects avoid our glances, shifting gravely away from the spectator, as though they were observed against their will. As a group, the series is resonant with echoes of Hals and Velázquez in the broad stroking and earthy palette. Like Rembrandt's figures, Géricault's *fous* seem to allow us to watch them think; like Rembrandt's figures, too, their fierce humanity seems inextricable from the stuff from which they are painted. These confrontational but elusive portraits of troubled men and women seem, at the same time, startlingly modern in their bald intensity and their iconic clarity. Géricault was less successful when he painted children, or at least when he painted them full-length. A few economical studies of children's heads, reduced to a few clear planes, are extremely convincing and engaging, but seated and standing children are possessed of a dreadful rigidity that turns them into what Tennessee Williams called "no-necked monsters." A passing observation: there are remarkably few women in Géricault's oeuvre: a couple of modest portraits, the two madwomen, a few sketches, a nude study for the Rome Prize competition, and that's about all. (Part of the Géricault myth includes a passionate love affair with his aunt by marriage, apparently clandestine, although she was the mother of Géricault's son, but does that really explain anything?)

The assembly of the portraits of *fous* is one of the high points of the show, as is the grouping of the three large landscapes, not unlike the way they were reassembled last year at the Metropolitan. They are peculiar pictures, at once appealing and slightly off-putting, highly mannered, with their stylized mountains and classical ruins. For all their artificiality, however, the sense of shifting light and changing times of day from painting to painting is striking. Yet compared to many of the vivid smaller canvases and watercolors, the three large landscapes seem somewhat cautious, as though painted according to a set of rules. By contrast, a small seascape (last seen at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries a few years ago) all but leaps off the wall, anticipating anything Courbet came up with: pounding waves as solid as the cliffs behind them, if not more so, and a palette of translucent blue-greens and deep Prussian blue-blacks that distills the changeable light of a seaside storm. There is apparently some argument about whether changes to the painting are due to restoration or to Géricault's reworkings, but whatever its history, it's a splendid picture.

The centerpiece of the show is, of course, the room of preparatory studies for *The Raft of the Medusa*. We can follow Géricault's journey toward his final conception through drawings that probe various aspects of the horrifying story: the foundering ship, the mutiny on the hideously overcrowded raft, a scene of cannibalism among the desperate survivors, and, finally, rescue. He tested and discarded all of these, sometimes after no more than a scrawled notation, other times after carefully exploring the image in a vigorous but detailed drawing. Eventually he arrived at the moment that triggered the final composition, a moment of great psychological drama and relatively little action, especially when compared to the violent scenes he had considered and rejected: the sighting of the *Argo*, the ship that would eventually rescue the handful of men left of the hundred and fifty who had boarded the raft thirteen days earlier. Then the real work began—studies of severed heads and limbs, with the grim changes of death pitilessly and eloquently recorded, portrait heads of survivors (well, likely looking types, anyway), anatomical studies, and all the rest of it. It's fascinating to see the final image evolve from its disparate parts, fascinating to realize that complete as the final watercolor sketches are, thorough as Géricault's preparation was, the most important changes in conception were made not in advance but in the course of painting the monumental canvas. In the studies, the corner of the tossing raft comes close to the lower edge of the sheet, but the figures, dead, dying, or frantically signaling, are all pushed into the middle of the picture. On the huge canvas, the spec-



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tator is brought much closer to the knot of tortured bodies. A corpse spills off the raft, at our feet, while still other ghastly dead figures come perilously close to escaping the confines of the floating platform. On canvas, the raft seems to fill all of the available space, so that the spectator is almost made part of the frightful crew, while the *Argo*, the savior vessel, pushed steadily back, growing smaller and smaller in the sketches, is here barely visible on the horizon.

Absorbing as the studies for *The Raft of the Medusa* are, the rest of the show is no less rewarding. We watch Géricault search for subjects that will engage his passions the way the story of the ordeal of the *Medusa*'s crew did. We watch him explore the possibilities of both the tangible and the remote, the actual and the fanciful, inventing images for real events of the period and for those drawn from literature. Current happenings in Europe provoked a series of robust drawings, heightened with watercolor, that at first glance seem to depict war in terms of glorious combat and galloping horses, but longer viewing reveals that these gallant images are often subverted by the presence of the wounded and the dead, both man and beast, not relegated to the background but given equal prominence. Drawings of dispirited, wounded soldiers, inspired by Napoleon's disastrous Russian campaign, make these implicit messages of brutality explicit.

Géricault seems to have tried it all—except for stagings of antique or mythological themes inspired by classical sculpture—once he left the Academy. There are the expected forays into orientalism, portraits of men in turbans and all the Byronic heroes and heroines necessary for a painter of Géricault's generation: Mazeppa, the bride of Abydos, Lara, the Giaour, and company. A splendid *Head of an Oriental* (Musée de Besançon) and a watercolor head "said to be of the model, Mustapha" (Musée du Louvre), notwithstanding, these orientalist images are often quite predictable, although the composition and theatrical lighting of a lithograph of Mazeppa, lashed to the back of his horse, are unusual.

These exotic motifs contrast oddly with the more casual, everyday subjects Géricault seems to have tackled with equal enthusiasm, especially during his soujourns in London. On the other hand, his images of London street life, almost Dickensian in their squalor, or the equally distinctive "horsey" subjects, ranging from elegant riders to blacksmiths to carthorses, seem to have little to do with his more typical pursuits. Certainly the sense of interior life, of emotional undercurrents, is usually absent in these pictures. Perhaps they were a deliberate effort to cater to what Géricault perceived as English taste. After exhibiting *The Raft of the Medusa* with considerable success in London, he apparently attempted to attract the notice of British patrons, which may explain the less inspired of the "horsey" studies, which often look more like English sporting prints than relatives of the amazing *Horse Frightened by Lighting* or the plunging Arab steeds.

The cumulative effect of the exhibition is, in fact, a sense of inconsistency, of search, inquiry, and refusal to be satisfied by solutions already found and proved, punctuated by extraordinary high points throughout a painfully short career. Each time Géricault considered a new motif or planned a new picture, he seems to have conceived freshly how the story could be told, the emotions made visible. This, as much as the sheer force of feeling in Géricault's pictures, as much as the urgency of his touch, is what ultimately sets him apart from the majority of his contemporaries, who were formed by the Academy, with its repeatable formulations and unbreakable rules. Part of this engaging restlessness, this energetic inquiry into what painting could *be* in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, must be due simply to the artist's youth; it is certainly part of what makes Géricault seem so immediate and so vivid, even today. If there are fewer major paintings than one might long for, we must blame a system that placed great importance on the single large-scale Salon picture and less on a coherent body of "private" efforts.



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For any ambitious painter of Géricault's generation, a considerable amount of time and energy must have been expended on gearing up for the annual Salon submission. I suppose we should count ourselves fortunate that Géricault produced as much as he did in his relatively few years of health and full creative energy.

Even without *The Raft of the Medusa*, the show at the Grand Palais is full of pictures that make Géricault's genius plain: small studies of soldiers and their horses, like the two studies of hussars from the Clark Museum, Williamstown, that distill an amazing range of colors, textures, and effects of light into different kinds of paint surfaces; brilliant uniforms, powerful horses, and atmospheric distances are all harmonized into unforgettable, rapidly sketched images, made all the more memorable by the way horse and rider angle away from the viewer. A conventional subject, at cabinet scale, is made completely new and unexpected. *The Artillery Train* (Neue Pinakothek, Munich) also seems to reinvent the military picture, by crowding a row of busbied soldiers tightly behind their gun at the extreme left and spraying an arc of galloping horses across the rest of the canvas, against a scrubby, glowing red-brown no-man's land. The list of superb works in the show is a long one: the Kimbell Museum's *Head of a Young Man*, face and collar rendered with a few telling strokes, the Musée de Montpellier's strangely lyrical, Titianesque pile of anatomical fragments, the Louvre's uncanny full-face portrait head of a white horse, the Getty Museum's compelling, deeply sympathetic *Head of a Black Man*, and, most intimate, perhaps, three drawings of Géricault's own emaciated left hand, done by the bed-ridden artist just before his death.

These drawings redeem a last section, admittedly called "The Myth of the Artist," that sinks to the level of the provincial museum or the shrine to the departed great man. We are treated to Géricault's deathmask, dreadful evidence of his agonizing last illness, a grim, Van Gogh-like posthumous portrait by a devoted admirer that confirms the implied horror of the deathmask, a cast of Géricault's right hand, and various sentimental paintings of the end of his life by lesser talents. This last section is something of a letdown, after what precedes it, but it does serve to make us think about Géricault's pitifully short career and wonder what he would have achieved had he lived. It's the question one always asks, about Masaccio, about Mozart, about Seurat. (How much more potent, how much more wide-ranging, how much more *formed* Géricault looks, in contrast to Seurat, or at least, in contrast to Seurat as represented in the recent retrospective exhibition.) There are other questions, too. What effect did Géricault's death have on Delacroix, five years younger and as impatient and ambitious as his colleague ever was? Delacroix lost a friend, an artist whom he admired and with whom he shared certain aspirations, but Géricault's death left the field clear for him to declare himself as the most passionate of the Romantics. The excitement with which Delacroix's *Massacre at Chios* was greeted at the Salon of 1824—Stendhal's testy dismissal of the picture apart—owed something to the absence of any work by Géricault, who died in January of that year. Without Géricault's example, Delacroix's work might have been very different; with a longer-lived Géricault, Delacroix's career might have been very different, as well.

But these are speculations. What is concrete is the work, and the testimony of the work in the Grand Palais's bicentennial show is eloquent. Not only does the enigmatic Géricault take on a clearer identity than ever before, but his importance to the history of nineteenth-century art becomes clearer as well. We won't look at Géricault the same way after this exhibition, nor will we look at his century the same way. That's probably the best two-hundredth-birthday present anyone could offer a painter.



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# Columbia's assault on the American novel

## *by Bruce Bawer*

History has seen few more grotesque ironies. In the past several years—while brave people in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, inspired largely by the example of American freedom and prosperity, have ousted the tyrannical Marxist regimes that enslaved and terrorized them for decades—a corps of Marxist humanities professors have carried off, here at home, a quieter but potentially no less momentous revolution of their own. As a result of this revolution, while Marxism has already expired in most of its former bastions and is in critical condition in many others, it is now flourishing in many of America's most eminent universities. From Princeton to Stanford, from Amherst to UCLA, undergraduates who take classes with faculty members who call themselves "New Historicists" are being indoctrinated in the very ideas about life, history, and culture that millions of Russians and Poles and Estonians have struggled to overthrow—ideas of whose disastrous consequences over the past seven decades those students are often terribly ignorant.

Any reader who suspects that the alarm in the above paragraph is exaggerated is urged to examine the newly published *Columbia History of the American Novel*, which may be the single most frightening document yet to emerge from the Marxist assault on American higher education—frightening not for what it says about the novel, but for what it says about the current state of the American academy.[1] Like many a conventional literary history, it is divided into four chronological sections, which are in turn divided into thirty topical chapters, each by a different academic hand. But this is no conventional literary history. Indeed, to read it is to step into an Orwellian nightmare where freedom is slavery, wealth is poverty, and knowledge is ignorance; it is to feel as if one is motoring through some Iron Curtain metropolis of the mind, down a boulevard lined with interchangeably gray and desolate edifices. For all but a handful of these chapters are identical in style and tone and point of view—identical in their frequently stated contempt for the notion of individuality, in their fixation on categories of race and gender, and in their insistence that America's only hope lies in socialist revolution. And identical, too, in their unabashed tendency to view literature as a facet of social history, to reduce novels to sociopolitical messages, and to grade authors according to a strict political-correctness scale. The chapters have different titles and supposedly different subjects (although, frankly, many of the titles don't *sound* very different), but often, reading the first paragraph of a new chapter, one feels as if one has mistakenly returned to the beginning of the chapter just completed.

For the real topic in this book is virtually always the same: the evils of the American

1 *The Columbia History of the American Novel*; Emory Elliott, general editor; Columbia University Press, 905 pages, $59.95.



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system and the proper role of literature as a tool of socialist revolution. To its authors, the United States is nothing less than a diabolical capitalist empire whose claim to be the headquarters of democracy is a joke and the central fact of whose history is its cruel oppression of women and people of color. The lack of historical perspective is awesome: in condemning America, with its unparalleled record of liberty and prosperity, the authors would seem to be comparing it not to any other actual society, past or present, but to some utopian society of the imagination, some never-never land modeled on Marxist ideals—modeled, that is, on those ideals that brought to power Lenin, Stalin, and Mao. Thus the authors routinely put words like "democracy" and "Founding Fathers" in quotation marks to indicate that the ideas represented by these words are not to be taken seriously; they slur classic authors on sexual, racial, and political grounds (in her chapter "Technology and the Novel," for example, Cecelia Tichi of Vanderbilt University calls Emerson a "white imperialist"); and they make remarks to the effect that "the Declaration of Independence always meant independence for white men only." Nowhere in these pages does one find a hint of gratitude for the freedoms that the Declaration's framers gave us and for which men fought and died; nowhere is there the slightest recognition that what is miraculous about the Declaration is not its limitations but the extraordinary courage, moral vision, and nobility of thought that made it possible—qualities alongside which the rhetoric of this book's authors is merely petty, pusillanimous parroting. The spectacle of these tweedy, tenure-driven profs from top-flight universities condemning the Declaration as insufficiently revolutionary would be hilarious if it were not so obscene.

The Marxism of this book's authors is, to be sure, a Marxism with a difference—a Marxism, one might say, for the Nineties. It is a Marxism that has embraced feminism and deconstruction and that finds room for a chapter on Gay Lit; a Marxism whose slogans about oppressed workers and capitalist tyrants alternate with formulaic statements about "how inextricable the issues of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and culture are in United States literary history." Time and again, novelists who have been dead for a century are criticized for failing to see their own time through the prism of modish 1990s politics (Poe, carps Joan Dayan of Princeton, "could never make the connection between slavery and the condition of white women in his society")—as if it were those long-departed novelists, rather than these living critics, whose obligation it was to understand the sensibilities of another time. (One is left wondering how the classic Marxist belief in class solidarity—which should, theoretically, cross lines of race and gender—can be reconciled with an enthusiasm for sexual and racial categories.)

But for the most part the new Marxism sounds pretty much like the old Marxism. The authors of these chapters have done a fine job of mastering the rhetoric of pre-perestroika Kremlin propaganda. Words like "hegemony" and "commodify" abound; writing about nineteenth-century women's fiction, Lora Romero of the University of Texas rejects the notion of the feminization of American culture on the grounds that while female novelists outsold their male colleagues, it was men who controlled the "means of production." And Ketu H. Katrak of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst lectures us that

> [p]hysical acts of conquest and aggression constitute only one aspect of colonial aspirations; mental colonizations perpetuated in a colonizer's language, education, and cultural values are often more devastating and resilient. One can trace a historical trajectory from the British Empire and its particular imperialist weapons like overt military force and more insidious ideological tools like the English language and British values, to American imperialism at free play in the world right now. In his 1955 text, *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire sounded a warning about the growing aspirations of American imperialist expansionism, amply evident in recent years.



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> United States imperialism works to its economic advantage through multinational corporations, international aid agencies, exploitation of cheap labor (creating loss of jobs and poverty within the United States). United States imperialism is also manifested in the display of military muscle and overt invasions of Grenada and Panama in recent years, flaunting [*sic*] with bravado both international law and the often merely symbolic U.N. resolutions. It is doubly ironic that in the recent conflict with Iraq, the United States was the loudest proponent of U.N. Security Council measures against Iraq—it suited the United States this time around to wave aloft U.N. Security Council resolutions, notwithstanding its previous records of vetoing such measures, even blocking the will of an entire world against certain types of aggression. Historical amnesia is a widely prevalent disease in the United States and it is effectively propagated by media complicitous with the status quo.
>
> Within the United States itself, forms of internal colonizations—of "minorities" who may or may not be American citizens, "social exiles," and disenchanted populations on the margins of the "American dream"—are sustained in part by United States aggressions *externally* against peoples of color. . . .

And so on, with nary a reference to the novel in sight.

At every turn in this book, moreover, one hears of the evils of "market forces." Hugh Kenner, for one, has brilliantly demonstrated how technology and the marketplace have influenced literary history; but Kenner doesn't confuse this sort of observation with literary criticism, doesn't view the marketplace as the incarnation of evil, and doesn't act as if its existence makes the idea of literary value absurd or irrelevant. After all, one of the purposes of criticism is to defend aesthetic value in the face of the general public's taste for the mediocre. To be sure, the authors of this book often act as if they accept the idea of aesthetic value, and refer to this or that book as so-and-so's finest achievement; but they routinely set aside literary criteria in order to assert a novelist's importance on the grounds of his or her gender, race, or class—and his or her consciousness thereof, on the basis of which they distinguish between true revolutionaries and mere reformists. As Phillip Brian Harper writes, "Contemporary social theory and cultural criticism are developing an ever-increasing sense of the fundamental interrelation of these categories [gender, race, and class] in the constitution of our society. Thus, to the extent that any given movement fails to recognize that interrelation, it then falls short of envisioning a really *revolutionary* social transformation—it is properly *reformist*." Non-revolutionaries can't win here: white male novelists whose work doesn't reflect an enthusiasm for social reform are castigated; those who do favor reform (as differentiated from revolution) are criticized for doing so out of self-interest, their ulterior motive being to thwart revolution and thereby "preserv[e] the hegemony of white Protestant elites." As for novelists who happen to be women, blacks, Asian-Americans, Indians, or members of the working class, who in their novels evince some degree of subversiveness toward the white male patriarchy (for instance, by writing fiction based on their own experiences as women, blacks, etc.), they are usually smiled upon. The general assumption here is that anyone short of a revolutionary is acting on selfish motives, and that radical socialism is the only true selflessness, the only authentically virtuous position.

The first section of the book, which covers the American novel from its beginnings to the mid-nineteenth century, focuses largely on the notion that male writers like Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe have been unfairly elevated in relation to their female contemporaries, and that this elevation is linked to the decline of colonial "communitarian" ideas and the nineteenth-century rise of the "laissez-faire ideology." (Oddly enough, however, the critics in this section, in spite of their attempts to broaden the canon, find themselves drawn again and again to these three male writers. Why? Could it be be-



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cause they reflect early nineteenth-century life with a depth and complexity that others don't?) Thus, in "The Book Marketplace I," Brandeis professor Michael T. Gilmore argues—follow this carefully, now—that while the "autonomous art" of writers like Hawthorne and Melville

> was in advance of mid-century economic practice, fiction's casting free from didacticism reproduced as cultural agenda the same structural imperative that informed liberal individualism. . . . The new aesthetic ideology's privileging of disinterestedness bespoke not transhistorical "purity" but rather rootedness in a modernizing capitalist society and affiliation with Adam Smith's increasingly influential defense of the market as a self-regulating sphere that should be "let alone."

Got that? In other words, just as the laissez-faire philosophy is a blight on economics and the concept of individuality a blight on human life, so the idea of literary autonomy—of the novel as something that should be judged not by the efficacy with which it communicates approved social messages but by the degree to which its author has managed to create a work of aesthetic merit and originality—is a blight on literature. All three notions, you see, are opposed to the ideal of class solidarity. (As Professor Gilmore puts it later, "the movement toward literary autonomy shared a structure of thought with free-market economics.")

While Hawthorne, Melville, and other male novelists aligned themselves with the laissez-faire ideology, scores of early nineteenth-century women wrote domestic novels that "affirmed connectedness over autonomy" and thereby aligned themselves with "the communitarian emphases of the early Republic." If women like Harriet Beecher Stowe—whose *Uncle Tom's Cabin* emerges here as the major American novel of the nineteenth century—were "socially constructive," "Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville turned the novel into a proto-modernist art form, self-contained and increasingly self-referential." Yes, self-referential—meaning not, as one might conclude, that the authors were writing about themselves, but that they made the mistake of seeing people as individuals rather than as interchangeable components of a crudely conceived social machine. These novelists' worst crime was that they were not crusaders but artists: "Melville's fictions awaken awareness of social injustice but leave the reader with no thought of changing things. . . . For Melville, the writer was a teller of Truth (invariably capitalized) who had privileged access to perceptions too terrible for common consumption; he had to smuggle his meaning to the select few while concealing it from the multitude." Melville was, in short, that foulest of all literary creatures—an elitist.

Absent from Professor Gilmore's discussion, of course, is any awareness that writers like Hawthorne and Melville illuminated human character far more deeply than a writer like Stowe. To the contrary, Professor Gilmore argues that the works of these men became "classics" as a consequence of various social and economic factors, among them the determination of male publishers, teachers, and critics to topple the best-selling female novelists that Hawthorne had scorned as "scribbling women." Doesn't Professor Gilmore have anything good to say about these male novelists? Yes: paradoxically, he admires them for having been "professionals" to whom "what counts is not the market but the appreciation of other literary professionals." That is, they existed apart from society's corruptions and wrote for one another (just like English professors!). What Professor Gilmore attacks in one paragraph as elitism, then, he praises in the next as aloofness from market considerations; what he speaks of admiringly in one paragraph as the commonfolk, he derides in the next as the marketplace. One must congratulate Professor Gilmore on this formulation, for few critics have ever so tidily illustrated the self-contradiction at the heart of academic Marxism as he has done here.

Lora Romero offers additional self-contradictions in her chapter on "Domesticity



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and Fiction." With one breath, Professor Romero—who has written articles on "minority discourse" and is "currently completing a book entitled *Domestic Fictions: A New Historicist Reading of the American Renaissance*"—castigates "the invidious nineteenth-century gender distinction" that separated "women writers" from their male colleagues; with the next, evincing a flair for bureaucratese that many a Defense Department functionary might envy, she says that "entirely abandoning this category of analysis seems unwise at this particular historic juncture." Why? "Given that women novelists have been excluded [from literary histories] *as a class*, feminist literary histories must include them *as a class*—albeit with the understanding that the category of 'women novelists' intervenes rather than describes, which is to say that it is used provisionally to redress strategic omissions in the scholarship rather than used to suggest either that women's novels are all the same or that they are necessarily different from men's novels." This, of course, makes no sense: if the authors' sex is irrelevant, why make it an issue? If women *have* been deliberately excluded in the past from literary histories, why not offer for resurrection specific novels by specific women, arguing for their inclusion in literary histories on merit alone, instead of reviving the whole body of women's work, bad and good alike, and concentrating on the authors' sex? Surely if one is sincerely interested in redressing real aesthetic injustices, it is strategically inadvisable to emphasize gender and to rehabilitate women's fiction "*as a class*."

Professor Romero's chapter contains further contradictions. For one thing, even as she ridicules what she calls "domestic ideology," the widespread nineteenth-century notion that women were a civilizing influence, she advances an anti-male, pro-female view that amounts to pretty much the same thing. For another, her task of rehabilitating nineteenth-century women's novels in the name of revolutionary feminism is complicated by the fact that virtually all those novels were assembly-line domestic fictions that championed the status quo—the woman's role as wife, mother, homemaker, and all-around Oppressed Party. The best Professor Romero can do is to churn out plenty of academic doubletalk and to suggest (with what seems very much like a touch of desperation) that an author like Louisa May Alcott, in *Little Women*, was in fact "subverting" the conventions that she seemed to be following slavishly. If Professor Romero fixates on the oppression of women, University of Maryland professor Robert S. Levine, in "Fiction and Reform I," fixates on slavery, grading authors on their awareness of racism and attacking Emersonian transcendentalism for focusing on the individual, not the society: "African American writers made clear what Emerson only occasionally faced up to: just how difficult it would have been for any American to achieve 'transcendental' individual reform within a social system countenancing slavery. In this respect, African American writers presented a fundamental challenge to white reformers who, in advocating various specific programs, could lose sight of the need for larger structural and ideological reorientation."

The book's second section, "The Late Nineteenth Century," opens with a chapter on "Realism" by Robert Shulman, a professor at the University of Washington who "is currently writing a book on *Political Art and the Politics of the Literary Canon: The 1930s Left Reconsidered*." Professor Shulman discusses the usual realistic novelists—Howells, Twain, James—with the addition, for obvious reasons, of a relatively obscure white woman (Rebecca Harding Davis) and black male (Charles Chesnutt). Professor Shulman's approach to his subject is exemplified by the fact that he combs through Henry James for material that can be interpreted as commentary on the evils of the capitalist system. One gets one's hopes up here, because for the first time in this history a critic gets close to a great text (and actually speaks of the "fun" of reading Henry James—a dead white male!). And of course James *does* have



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things to say about money. But he is writing ultimately about human character, about the subtle and fascinating ways in which money affects human interaction. And Professor Shulman is, alas, not interested in probing human character but in condemning "consumer capitalism" and the "possessive market society," interested not in understanding how money influences human interaction but only in tossing off vulgar Marxist labels that don't help one to understand anything.

As for Mark Twain, the book to which Professor Shulman pays the most attention is not a novel but *Life on the Mississippi*, which affords him the opportunity to observe that Twain's river pilot is "enmeshed in a system of supply and demand." But the book he discusses at greatest length is Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills*. Professor Shulman is not the only critic here who attempts to resurrect Davis's novel; for their purposes, it would seem to be the perfect book for canon inclusion, and the terms of Professor Shulman's praise suggest why. "We must be grateful," he writes, "to a narrator who gives us compelling insights into class barriers, into the hegemonic infiltration of working-class consciousness, and into the thwarting and spiritual hunger of middle-class women as well as of foreign-born workers." If the novel has a weakness, it's that it's not enough of a manifesto: "Part of what is missing from the narrator's story . . . is any sense of the kind of working-class consciousness and cohesion [the labor historian] Herbert Gutman finds among actual nineteenth-century American workers. The story also negates the prospect of radical change." The novel, then, is meritorious to the degree that it advocates social revolution, unworthy to the degree that it doesn't.

Davis is also among the writers lauded in the chapter entitled "Fiction and Reform II" by Phillip Brian Harper—a Harvard professor whose "current scholarship, on social marginality and postmodern fiction, and on social division in African American Culture, has been supported by grants from the Mellon Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities." Professor Harper praises Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* but notes that "what caught public attention about Sinclair's book was not so much the degraded condition of the workers' lives but rather the appalling practices of the meatpacking industry in its preparation of foods for market." He doesn't seem to have a clue as to why this might be the case; to a reader not blinded by Marxist slogans, however, it is obvious that the reason for this public response was that the people in the book are lifeless, one-dimensional, easy not to care about—and certainly far less memorable than the graphically described meat-packing practices. Professor Harper doesn't recognize this because it doesn't occur to him to notice whether the characters are believable; he is too busy rating the book on a political-correctness scale.

A chapter on "Nation, Region, and Empire" has been contributed by Amy Kaplan of Mount Holyoke, the author of *Social Construction of American Realism* and of a book in progress "about American imperialism." Here is an example of the kind of insight that Professor Kaplan has to offer: *The Sea-Wolf*, she says, presents "the powerful homoerotic desire between men as a symbol of national unity." But she devotes less space to literature than to political generalizations. She patently loves the idea of "American imperialism," and cites our invasions of Cuba, the Philippines, Panama, and Grenada; but she neglects to point out that we didn't hang on to Cuba and the Philippines for very long, neglects to distinguish between our reasons for going into Panama and Grenada and, say, the Soviets' motives for invading Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland (of course, none of these exploits rates a mention in this book), and does her best to ignore the fact that Americans have always been not imperialist but outrageously isolationist in temperament compared to the citizens of other great nations, that we have always been singularly uncomfortable with the idea of running an empire and have habitually divested ourselves of "colonies"



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as soon as possible, and that the closest thing we now have to a colony, Puerto Rico, has benefited so greatly from our dominion that it doesn't *want* to be cut loose (however much many of us in the States would like to see it go). None of which, in any case, has much to do with literary matters.

This brings us to "Gender and Fiction," in which Elizabeth Ammons of Tufts University discusses five women novelists: Wharton, Cather, an obscure black, and two obscure Asians. Professor Ammons makes some valid points here, among them that American male writers have often worried about literature being a "feminine" pastime. Yet she doesn't stray for long from the much-trod turf of previous chapters, churning out some empty rhetoric about how for women writers like Wharton and Cather "the most pressing issue was finding a way to reconcile the conflict embodied for them in the terms 'woman' and 'artist,'" while for women writers of color "the challenge was even more complex" since "[i]t involved combating racist, cultural, and entrenched class biases as well as gender issues." She chides Edith Wharton for being a conservative elitist and for rejecting the label of "woman writer," but decides that, on balance, she's OK because she was a woman rebelling against male domination; as for Cather, she's not politically correct either, but earns extra points for being a lesbian: "even in *My Antonia* . . . , many critics argue, the central love relationship between Jim and 'Tony' (Antonia) makes most sense if it is read not simply as a heterosexual attraction but also as a camouflaged same-sex one." Professor Ammons speaks of "how very difficult it was for different women to become novelists in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century." Yet she contradicts herself on this question, complaining, on the one hand, that women had trouble being published and accepted, yet bragging, on the other, that "as a group white women novelists were so successful that their work clearly threatened white men at the time."

If Professor Ammons champions women's fiction over men's, Christine Bold, in "Popular Forms I," champions escapist trash over literary fiction, writing of the "dime novels," with their rags-to-riches plots, that

> [c]ritics have read these plots to different allegorical effect, some arguing that they told working-class readers that they could be both workers and heroines, others arguing that the endings betray and trivialize workers. . . . These stories were spoken by the people, inasmuch as story papers and dime novels fostered a massive new reading public, especially from the working classes, and those readers collectively and individually 'authored' meanings in their own interests. At the same time, some authorial voices attempted to speak to the people, to fashion a direct address that sustained an impression of intimacy and individual relationship within the homogenizing effects of mass production. And the publishers sought to speak for the people. Developing marketing strategies to demarcate their audience by gender and generation, they produced several distinct formats for cheap fiction, each with its own ideology, agenda, and vocabulary.

This is, of course, preposterous. Dime novels were hackwork, experienced by their readers on the level not of art but of escapist entertainment; their publishers didn't seek to "speak for" people but rather to give a barely literate mass audience the crude diversions that it wanted and thereby make a buck. Professor Bold is, it would seem, so desperate to boost popular fiction at the expense of "elitist" literature that she's even willing to pretend to see Marxist virtues in the market-driven decisions of turn-of-the-century publishing czars. She's not alone in this, of course: several of the authors of this book find popular—and purportedly populist—junk to exalt. (Terence Martin, for instance, takes time out from celebrating nineteenth-century trash in his chapter on "The Romance" to include Stephen King's *Misery* in a list of "powerful twentieth-century texts.")



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From Professor Bold on the dime novel, we turn to Margot Norris on high modernism. Though Norris, a professor at the University of California at Irvine, begins her chapter on "Modernist Eruptions" with a straightforward account of Hemingway as modernist and a jargon-free discussion of *The Great Gatsby* that recognizes its deepest truths as universal and not specific to democratic capitalism, this chapter—which opens the section on "The Early Twentieth Century"—is most notable for its emphasis on Gertrude Stein's role in modernism and for Professor Norris's description of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* as "a textual embrace, a text that problematizes the notion of authorship with a principle of female collectivity that makes it ambiguous and undecidable whether it was Gertrude or Alice who 'created' the books, having become two in one mind and one life as well as in one flesh." One wonders: would any of the critics in this book speak of a heterosexual couple in this way? If a male writer appropriated his wife's name and life and foisted his voice on her as Stein did to Toklas, isn't it clear that these critics would not lionize him but rather accuse him of sexual oppression? Yet because Stein is a woman, her presumed domination of Toklas is evidently just dandy.

The chapter on "American Proletarianism" is by Paul Lauter of Trinity College, who, we are told, "has worked both as activist and academic through much of his life." The coordinating editor of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, a former editor of the Feminist Press, and a member of the editorial board of *Radical Teacher* and of the board of Resist, Lauter writes enthusiastically about how "the Communist Party and its allies took the lead at home in organizing the unemployed, fighting for aid to the dispossessed, turning despair into militance," and about how the Party, "for all its patriarchal practice [this, apparently, being its major flaw], provided encouragement and support for women artists unusual in American society." Lauter acknowledges "[t]he subsequent heeling of the movement under Party control, the later debates over the validity of the idea of a proletarian culture . . . , the intricacies of organizational infighting in the Soviet Union and elsewhere throughout the twenties and thirties, and the emergence of the idea that literary content and ideas should be directed by the policies of a proletarian 'vanguard party,'" but he says that these unfortunate developments "do not concern us here, except to the extent that [they] help to explain the growing disrepute of the idea [of proletarian fiction] itself." Funny, isn't it, that while the supposed political failings of America are considered relevant throughout this book, the direct attempts of the Soviet Communist Party to influence American proletarian fiction are not considered relevant to the history of that very genre. It is, in any event, the devotion of that genre to Communist Party ideology that makes it so attractive to Professor Lauter: "to serve a political function in a communist movement," he notes approvingly, "a writer could not simply reproduce the relationships of bourgeois culture, appropriating people's lives into narratives and selling them back as commodities." No, instead he could only imagine working-class heroes who were thoroughly unbelievable in their noble dedication to Party ideals and capitalist villains who were ludicrous in their knavery—an achievement for which Professor Lauter would appear to have the highest regard.

This flagrantly offensive chapter is followed by one that is only solidly inane. For those of us who missed John W. Campbell's 1930 space-opera novel *Islands of Space*, Bill Brown of the University of Chicago, in "Popular Forms II," delineates its plot, which involves an "interplanetary confrontation" that is settled by earthlings who "offer their technology to the winning side as a means of ensuring further peace, and thus establish American technocratic, neo-colonialist hegemony." One doesn't know whether to laugh or cry at this sort of thing. In "Race and Region," Thadious M. Davis of Brown University determines the racial political-correctness quotient of Faulkner, who,



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"though unconcerned with rendering African Americans outside of their relationships to white Southerners, nonetheless created a large number and a fairly diverse range of people of color, not all of them sympathetic representations," and of Fitzgerald, who gets a lower score than Faulkner; and she puts in a good word for Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—a great book that deserves better than to be described as having been "reevaluated not in the context of race and the folk but rather in the contexts of gender identifications and feminist readings of her strategies for female liberation and autonomy." By contrast, in a chapter entitled "Ethnicity and the Marketplace," of all things, Thomas J. Ferraro of Duke actually takes a responsible approach to the idea of aesthetic value, referring—believe it or not—to writers who "transcended ethnic consciousness." (How did this get past the editors?) Likewise, in "Fiction of the West," James H. Maguire of Boise State University complains that good novelists like Walter Van Tilburg Clark "often found themselves ranked with Zane Grey . . . which is a good deal like placing William Faulkner in the same artistic category as Margaret Mitchell on the ground that they both wrote about the South." Which is, of course, exactly what most of the critics in this book do—namely, rank trash with (or above) literature on extra-aesthetic grounds. Yet even Professor Maguire finds a way to be politically correct, recording with approval that "contemporary Western novelists stand united in their opposition to the rape of the land. They know that the frenzied rush toward ecocide will not abate until we gain a new consciousness of our relationship to the earth and its creatures."

David Van Leer of the University of California, Davis, begins his chapter on "Society and Identity" by badmouthing the 1950s: "From our current vantage, the postwar generation seems most notable for its isolationism, consumerism, conformity, and apathy. . . . we tend today to remember the age of Eisenhower as repressive and anaesthetized—the generation of the Mouseketeers and 'Leave It to Beaver.'" Speak for yourself, one wants to say: the Fifties were the height of American peace, prosperity, and freedom; we'd saved the world from fascism and were the bulwark against Stalinist terror—about which Professor Van Leer says nothing, though he makes it plain that he regards anti-Communism (which he associates, bemusingly, with "gender stereotypes") as vulgar, naïve, nefarious. "The conservative tone in politics and gender stereotyping," he says, "was reinforced by the individualistic bias of the age's dominant intellectual trends." Among those trends was existentialism, whose effect was unfortunate because "[w]hen translated into a popular idiom . . . the philosophy tended to encourage individual self-absorption over social involvement." Likewise, most Fifties novels focused on the interaction of individual characters rather than on the inequities of the American political system; and the Catholic fictions of J. F. Powers and Flannery O'Connor "tended to an otherworldliness that unintentionally reinforced the status quo." As for Salinger, "the suicide of the more mature Seymour Glass, and perhaps even Salinger's own refusal to publish after the mid-1960s, suggested that the elevation of the individual over society did not lead to a constructive program for growth or change." Even the Beats, "for all their revolutionary fervor . . . were unable to overcome fully their white middle-class roots, which surfaced in an implicit classism, racism, and sexism that weakened even the strongest of these narratives." The problem with the novels of Kerouac, Kesey, and Mailer was that in each of these works "[t]he existential hero confronted his fate alone, and discontent was expressed not through revolution but through transcendence and acceptance." Where, then, do we turn for significant writing? Why, to "the problematic work of such popularizers as C. Y. Lee and Patrick Dennis," the gay author of *Auntie Mame*, in whose work "we can begin to sense a more covert attempt to define group identity." For "the literatures of identity, especially minority literatures and the



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literature of environment, fostered a sense of group solidarity at odds with the pronounced individualism of the times." Interesting, isn't it, that a man so in love with the idea of "solidarity" and "group identity" can be so hostile toward the idea of "conformity"—and can equate the latter with "individualism"?

The highlights of the final section, on "The Late Twentieth Century," include a chapter on "Postmodern Realism" in which José David Saldívar writes that

> when I recently asked my literature students at the University of California, Santa Cruz, what the phrase "narrative for the next society" meant, many of them said that the *fotonovelas* of Jaime and Gilbert Hernández [i.e., Spanish-language comic books for grown-ups in which drawings are replaced by photographs] are the narratives for the next society. My students' thinking about these postmodern *fotonovela* historiographies seems characteristic of the turn-of-the-century human moments when we seek new definitions and utopian designs to resist the despair of things on many of our contested college campuses.
>
> What their answer suggests to me is that many students in California (the Baudrillardean site of the postmodern) believe the function of narrative belongs to a *fotonovela*, popular space in which an extended global borderland audience interacts with visual and performative artists. If Rap, as Houston Baker says, is "the form of auditions in our present era that utterly refuses to sing anthems of, say, whitemale hegemony," the borderland *fotonovelas* of Jaime and Gilbert Hernández may be the new heterogenous and heteroglot form articulating the hurts wrought by and before the emergence of the "State Line," which always constructs and preserves homogeneity.

From Professor Saldívar's classroom we proceed to Ed Cohen's bathroom. In "Constructing Gender," Cohen, a professor at Rutgers, tells about his tortured discovery of his gay identity: "from the age of thirteen on I had been plagued by a serious inflammatory bowel disease that kept me moving between toilets and hospitals in an unconscious attempt to give material form to the emotional pain that flowed through me. . . . Now, admittedly, I'm what some might call a drama queen, so I tend to take things to their extremes and perhaps this case is no different from many others in my life." This would be idiotic in any context, but in *The Columbia History of the American Novel* it is ludicrously out of place. Professor Cohen's campy references to such things as Dorothy and Oz, meanwhile, do a neat job of reinforcing gay stereotypes. (One is surprised not to find any mention of "Dynasty.") What's curious here is that Professor Cohen, for all his breathtaking narcissism, insists on his contempt for the individual and his enthusiasm for the "group."

No less curious is the chapter on "Colonialism, Imperialism, and Imagined Homes," wherein Ketu H. Katrak explains why America is worse than the Soviet Union: "As with British colonial aggression, which consolidated itself with the chalk and the blackboard, the tools of American cultural imperialism are often more lasting and more devastating than physical acts of aggression. Several postcolonial writers testify to the lasting and devastating psychic fractures rooted in colonial(ist) educational systems. . . ." Whatever America may do vis-à-vis the Third World, Professor Katrak describes it in such a way as to make it sound evil. Thus, when America embraces Third World writers, it is commodifying them; when it gives the Third World television, it is exercising domination in the form "of satellite communications bombarded into living rooms"; when it gives the Third World money, its domination is taking the form of an "International Monetary Fund stranglehold on local economies forcing constant currency devaluations that foster and perpetuate poverty and economic crises." (Of course, if America didn't do any of these evil things, that would be evil too.) Professor Katrak extols Salman Rushdie's anti-Western *The Satanic Verses* but neglects to mention that it was a Third World govern-



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ment that condemned Rushdie to death for writing the book and a First World government that protected him despite his attacks on it—an incident that perfectly reflects the essential difference between First and Third World political philosophies. As for the other most renowned Indian novelist of our time, Bharati Mukherjee, Professor Katrak finds her "classist" and "elitist" because she "overtly endorses the melting-pot concept and regards American society as the most welcoming of any in the world toward the 'other.' Even when racism is part of her exploration and critique, there is no attempt to place that racism within larger political systems of exploitation and inequality in the United States." Mukherjee is also at fault for showing Indian practices as backward: "Her depiction of certain regressive customs like *sati* (widow-burning), of child-marriage, and of widowhood are not mediated by changes and challenges to these traditions in contemporary India." In other words, it's fine for a novelist to vilify the United States on virtually any grounds whatever but not fine for him to depict the barbaric customs that are an everyday part of Third World life. Anyone who relied on such a critic as Professor Katrak for the truth would come away with the idea that women are better off in the Third World than in the First; or, if they are worse off in the Third World, that this is somehow the First World's fault.

If all the above makes *The Columbia History of the American Novel* sound numbingly repetitious, rest assured that, for the sake of variety, I have gone out of my way to stress the distinctive characteristics of the book's several contributors. In particular, I have omitted numerous rote declarations about the need for revolution, all of which make the authors sound like so many jittery, gray-suited apparatchiks at a Stalin-era Communist Party congress. Ditto the ritualistic creedal statements about race, gender, and class, such as the following four specimens from Professors Harper, Ammons, Lauter, and John M. Unsworth (in his chapter, "The Book Marketplace II"):

> We may be aided here by recourse to what are currently taken as the three dominant modes of social categorization—gender, race, and class.

> The subject of gender empowerment and the American novel does not exist independent of questions of race, class, and culture.

> [T]he analytic categories of gender and race help reattach the politics of proletarianism to the work of early writers . . . who had insisted that radical change involves transforming not only economic but social relations.

> In addition to reflecting our hierarchy of gender, the literary marketplace reflects our presuppositions about race and our predispositions toward class.

Plainly, there is not a scintilla of original critical insight on exhibit here, only a series of drab restatements of the party line. And what more, after all, could one expect from a group of critics who have rejected the notion of individuality? In these pages every novel, however intricate, becomes a crude sociopolitical parable, and the history of every period, however complex, is rendered as a simple struggle between oppressors and oppressed. Time and again, the deep becomes shallow, one book becomes very much like another, and every historical era is seen to be contemptible in exactly the same way. One hardly knows what to be more exasperated about after reading this so-called literary history: the authors' failure to understand literature or their failure to understand history. What both come down to, of course, is the failure to understand human nature that is at the core of any intellectual or political system based on Marxist-style groupthink. For groupthink is at odds with the reality of the profoundest human emotions: people fall in love as individuals; they find God, or fall away from Him, as individuals; they read and perceive the world and experience beauty as individuals. The great lesson of the twentieth century is that any system based upon groupthink, however



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estimable its initial motives, contains the seeds of moral justification for abominable acts against individuals. The Western respect for the individual has made possible the most prosperous and tolerant civilization in history—the civilization that takes most seriously the moral arguments against war and that provides the greatest liberty for minority peoples and views—and the most glorious art. It is one thing to respect other civilizations, another to romanticize them —to drop down the memory hole the fact that eighteenth-century Africans sold each other into slavery and that pre-Columbian Indian tribes spent much of their time making vicious war on one another.

Individuality is precious. And literature is valuable precisely because it touches us as individuals—touches us, at its most sublime, as deeply and fully and ambiguously as love and grace. In the West, our commitment to individuality leads us to espouse pluralism and academic freedom, ideas that can make us feel uncomfortable about opposing the presence of academic Marxists in English departments or even about honestly appraising their critical methods. But *The Columbia History of the American Novel* reminds us dramatically that pluralism is not a tenet of Marxism and that what we call academic freedom and individual rights are, in the eyes of academic Marxists, not cherished concepts but abominations. This is not to say that it is time for a new McCarthyism, but rather to say that those of us who oppose the academic Marxists should not hesitate to struggle against them on the battlefield of ideas, to point out their hypocrisy in working for American universities and living comfortable American lives. And it is to say that those of us who pretend it is possible to occupy a passive middle ground—a "liberal center"—between academic Marxists and their forthright opponents should stop deceiving ourselves. Either that, or hope that the so-called "reactionaries" win this battle—or that the Marxists don't really mean what they say about democracy and individuality. Meanwhile, those of us who find ourselves shocked by the publication of *The Columbia History of the American Novel* may be excused, I think, for wondering not only why a respected press like that of Columbia University has published this piece of unadulterated political propaganda under the guise of literary history, but why it has allowed its name to be included in the book's title. If one accused the president and trustees of Columbia University of supporting Marxist revolution, what would they do? Find it ridiculous, no doubt—yet another instance of "culture wars" hyperbole. Yet what else is one to conclude, when they have allowed the name of their institution to be placed on a book that explicitly advocates just such a revolution?



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# Six poems by Jorge Luis Borges

## *translated, with an introduction, by Robert Mezey*

Considering that Jorge Luis Borges has been world-famous for thirty years, it is curious that, in North America at least, his fame should rest almost entirely on his stories and essays. I suppose that his readers generally know that he also wrote poetry, but most of them will have read little or none of it. Since his fame is partly sustained by the academic industry that has grown up around him, it may be that his stature as a poet has been obscured by the relative indifference of academic critics to his poetry. For example, in *Critical Essays on Jorge Luis Borges* (1987), a book of nearly two hundred pages comprising sixteen contributors, only John Updike devotes any attention—two of his fifteen pages—to the poems, of which, in an otherwise perceptive essay, he has nothing special to say. Borges once remarked, "I think what's important is the way a man is moved when he reads poetry. If a man doesn't feel poetry physically, then he doesn't feel poetry at all. He had better become a professor or critic." Unfortunately, most professors and critics do suffer from that deficiency, and so they are interested in ideas and in theories, not in the aesthetic experience, what Borges liked to call (using the English word) "el *thrill*."

Yet Borges, like Thomas Hardy, began and ended as a poet, he saw himself as essentially a poet, and it was for poetry that he reserved his deepest love: "Poetry is a passion, now elbowed aside by politics and economics. That passion is a form of happiness, maybe the highest." He published more than a dozen volumes of poetry; his *Obra Poética* and two late books contain over four hundred poems. Again like Hardy, he is one of the very few writers to have achieved something like greatness in both fiction and verse. Twenty years ago, he wrote, "In the long run, perhaps, I shall stand or fall by my poems." I think he will stand. I regard him as one of the great poets of the century and, more urgently, as an excellent model for young American poets in both hemispheres, far more useful now than, say, Neruda.

All of the commentators who have considered the matter, at least those I am acquainted with, seem to agree that Borges's work is all of a piece. Borges himself sometimes affected to see little difference between prose and verse. (At other times he saw an enormous difference.) Certainly one finds the same themes, endlessly recycled, throughout his writings: the mystery of time and self and memory, the extreme idealist notion that life is a dream (and the various other metaphysical puzzles and paradoxes for which he had an apparently inexhaustible fondness), the monstrous multiplication of words and worlds, the celebration of disinterested physical courage, types of treachery, what he called his "hallmarks—Buenos Aires, ancestor worship, old Germanic tongues"—and those obsessive and ubiquitous images of mirrors, swords, labyrinths,



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and tigers "that the resigned reader has already reckoned on." Brevity is another hallmark, and a matter of principle. His tales and essays are famously brief, sometimes only a page or two. So are the poems. Although he loved the epic, he composed short meditative lyrics; his characteristic length is fourteen lines, the length of a sonnet, and in his other favorite form, unrhymed hendecasyllables, he rarely runs to more than thirty or forty lines. Just as he writes stories that resemble essays and essays that tell stories, so his poems are full of logical argument and of narrative; as he says, "In my later poetry, a narrative thread is always to be found. As a matter of fact, I even think of plots for poems." And whatever the medium or genre, the writing is always of a very high order. What Joseph Epstein says of the stories, that they "are all written with a fine eye for detail, for the arresting juxtaposition of word and event, and with that precision and clarity which, combined, make for the highest literary elegance," is equally so for the poems.

All this is true, yet I do not assent to the proposition that Borges the poet is not clearly distinguishable from the author of the essays and the tales. For all the pleasures they afford, I confess to finding them a little airless and self-contained, representations of a conceptual world more than a human one. They are almost always concerned with the extraordinary and the incredible. Erotic love and moral excruciations rarely figure. But in the poems, we are in another world. There, our Borges lives and suffers, mourns his dead friends, grieves for lost or unrequited love, praises great writers and warriors, and meditates on death. It is a Borges altogether more soulful, more personal, more undefended against the pathos and horror of life. And he can give us sometimes, as all the good ones do, "the dearest freshness deep down things," a radiant world made out of words, even as, on occasion, he doubts the power of words to make it. Yet for all its freshness, it is a familiar world, and a credible one; his love and respect for common human experience is most evident in his poetry. He prized those of his poems that express "what everyone feels"—in this he was like his beloved Dr. Johnson.

He even came to feel that a poet ought not try to invent ingenious or original figures, that the few metaphors that had endured for millennia—time and a river, life and dream, sleep and death, eyes and stars, women and flowers—were enough. He had begun as an avant-garde Romantic, a disciple of Whitman, an enthusiast for Bolshevism, a free-verse bard of local color and odd usages—all the usual fancies of a young poet, many of which he would later view with a jaundiced eye. As the years passed, he learned to reduce the poetic enterprise to the simplest of means: meter and rhyme, usually; a plain, even austere, vocabulary; a firm, logical structure; and that handful of ancient metaphors. He consciously avoided the striking, the decorative, everything that smacked of fine writing. (And of political opinion: a year or two before his death, he said, "Engaged poetry makes no sense. Poetry is engaged with poetry.") In the end, his values were mostly classical—reason, clarity, scrupulousness of form, and measured feeling all the stronger for being understated and restrained.

I have been working for over three years with my friend and colleague R. G. Barnes to create a Borges in English who could give our American readers a fair idea of how fine a poet he is in Spanish, how intelligent, how interesting, how moving. We set ourselves three tasks. First, to be as faithful as we possibly could to the meaning, which is almost always lucid, and to the tone; second, and something that few other translators have attempted, being less foolhardy, to work in meter and rhyme wherever Borges does, establishing what he called "the essential thing in a line of verse, the correspondence between the emotion and the sound of the verse"; and, above all, to make good English poems, to see that not all the poetry got lost in translation and that some of what must be lost was re-created in its new language. Obviously, each of these aims, difficult in itself,



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makes the other two immeasurably more difficult, and we increased the difficulty by questioning each other's versions relentlessly. Two of the following six poems have been identified as collaborations, but in fact all of our translations have been collaborations to some extent.

Yehudah Amichai once called poetry "a filibuster against despair." One often senses that Borges, for all his capacity for delight and joy, is fending off, line by line, the miseries of existence, that poetry is for him a form of bravery also. He feels he has wasted his life on the "trifles and emptinesses of art." He wishes he were someone else. Unrequited love makes him wish he were dead. He longs not merely to die but to be utterly forgotten. He even prays to be spared from hope. And yet I insist, and a veteran reader of poetry will understand me perfectly, that a certain serenity and stoic gaiety preside over these hopeless and heartbreaking poems. Borges is an alchemist who transmutes the pain and weariness of life into exaltation, into "el *thrill.*" It has given Mr. Barnes and me the profoundest pleasure to be at the service of Don Jorge, this most bookish, this most intimate of poets.



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# The art of poetry

To look at the river made of time and water
And to remember time is another river,
To know that we too vanish like the river
And that our faces flow away like water.

To feel that being awake is another sleep
That dreams it is not dreaming, that the death
That spreads fear in our flesh is the very death
That we die every night and call sleep.

To see in the day or in the year a symbol
Of all the days of man and of his years,
And to transmute the insult of the years
Into a music, a murmuring, a symbol.

To see in death a sleep, or in the sunset
A melancholy gold—such is poetry,
Beggared yet immortal, poetry
That comes back like the dawn and like sunset.

Sometimes, in late afternoon, a face
Looks at us from the depths of a dark mirror;
Art ought to be like that unblinking mirror
Revealing to each of us his own true face.

They say Ulysses, sick and tired of marvels,
Wept with love at the sight of Ithaca,
Green and simple. Art is that Ithaca
Of simple, green eternity, not marvels.

And art is also like the unending river,
Going yet staying, mirroring the same
Changeable Heraclitus, who is the same
And yet another, like the unending river.



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## Paris, 1856

The long prostration has accustomed him
To presages of death. He'd be afraid
To go down to the strident day outside
And shuffle among men. Quite overcome,
Heinrich Heine meditates anew
On time's river that floats him slowly away
From that long shadow and harsh destiny
That made him a human being and a Jew.
He muses on the delicate melodies
Whose instrument he was, but well he knows
His music comes not out of birds or boughs
But out of time and its phantasmal days.
They will not save you, no, neither your flowers
Nor nightingales nor golden midnight hours.



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# The cipher

The tacit friendship of the moon
(I am misquoting Virgil) goes with you
since that now lost and time-devoured night,
or coming on of evening, when your blurry
eyes deciphered it, you thought forever,
in a garden or a patio now dust.
Forever? I am sure that someone, sometime,
will have the heart to tell you truthfully
*Never again will you behold the moon.*
*You have used up the exact, invariable*
*number of times your destiny allows.*
*No use opening now all the world's windows.*
*It is too late. You won't be seeing her.*
We live discovering and then forgetting
that customary sweetness of the night.
You must look hard. This time could be the last.

*—translated with R. G. Barnes*



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## Milonga of Manuel Flores

Manuel Flores is going to die.
You can bet your money it's true;
And dying, well, that's a common thing
That people know how to do.

And still, to say goodbye to life
Pierces me to the bone,
Life that is such an everyday thing,
So intimately known.

I look at my hands at daybreak,
I look at the veins, the pulse,
With a queer feeling, almost as if
They belonged to someone else.

Four final bullets will come and then
I won't know if any mourn;
Merlin the magician said it:
Dying is having been born.

So many things on the road of life
Were given these eyes to see!
Who knows what other things
After Christ judges me.

Manuel Flores is going to die,
You can bet your money it's true,
And dying is a common thing
Everyone knows how to do.



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# The hourglass

Yes, it is well enough that time be measured
By the hard shadow a pillar casts in summer
Or by the water moving in that river
Where Heraclitus once saw our obsession,

Since both resemble time and destiny:
The deep imponderable daily shadow,
And the cold coursing tendency of water
Continuing irreversibly on its way;

Well enough. But time found in the desert
Another medium, both soft and heavy,
One that seems almost to have been invented
For measuring out the eons of the dead.

And so arose the allegorical instrument
You see in pictures in the dictionaries,
The kind of thing that grey antiquaries
Relegate to the ashen tenements

Of the lone chesspiece, the all but harmless
Old sword, the blurry telescope,
The sandalwood pipe bitten by opium,
And dust—dust, accident, and nothingness.

Who hasn't taken thought before the severe
And gloomy device held fast in the right
Hand of the god with the long scythe,
Whose withered lines were mirrored once by Dürer?

Through the pierced apex of the inverse
Lower cone the trickling sandstream falls,
Gradual gold that loosens as it fills
The concave crystal of its universe.



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It is agreeable to watch the unknown
Sand as it slides and declines and then, just
About to fall, swarms about with a haste
That is entirely and all too human.

The same sand is also the sand of kalpas,
And endless, endless is its history;
And so, beneath your bliss or misery,
Timeproof eternity caves in on itself.

Its falling never pauses, not for a minute.
I will bleed dry, but not the glass. The rite
Of pouring off the sand is infinite
And with the sand our life goes pouring out.

I can believe I sense in sand's revolving
A cosmic time: immeasurable series,
Which memory thinks to imprison in its mirrors
And Lethe's magic flood keeps on dissolving.

Both Rome and Carthage with their hard-pressed legions,
The great pillar of cloud and pillar of fire,
Simon Magus, the seven feet of dirt
The Saxon king offers to the Norwegian—

All that is swept away and nullified
By this untiring, subtile thread of sand.
Nor am I fated to save myself, a chance
Creature of time, which is a stuff that slides.

*—translated with R. G. Barnes*



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# Epilogue

Now that the sum of footsteps given to you
to walk upon the earth has been fulfilled,
I say that you have died. I too have died.
I, who recall the very night we made
our laughing, unaware farewells, I wonder
what on earth has become of those two young men
who some time around nineteen-twentysomething
went looking, with naïve Platonic faith,
down the long sidewalks of the southern night
or in the deep guitar Paredes played
or in the lore of streetcorners and knives
or in the dawn, which no one has ever touched,
for the true, secret city of Buenos Aires?
Brother in the sonorities of Quevedo
and the loved numbers of the hexameter,
discoverer (as we all were in those days)
of that timeworn utensil, metaphor,
Francisco Luis, my studious old friend,
if only you were here to share with me
this empty dusk, however impossibly,
and help me to improve these lines of verse.



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Architecture

# Clipper-Class classicism: Robert Venturi's London adventure

*by Roger Kimball*

*Beauty is that reasoned harmony of all the parts within a body, so that nothing may be added, taken away, or altered, but for the worse.*

—Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*

*I am for messy vitality over obvious unity. I include the non sequitur and proclaim the duality.*

—Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*

At least since 1940, when Hitler's Luftwaffe gutted Hampton's furniture store directly to the West of London's National Gallery, the prized site on the northwest corner of Trafalgar Square has been the subject of public controversy. The government bought the bombed-out, irregularly shaped site in the late 1950s, intending to build an addition to William Wilkins's stately neoclassical museum that presided over the entire north face of Trafalgar Square. But postwar austerity dictated that the empty plot remain empty, and for more than twenty years one of central London's choicest pieces of real estate was put to use as a parking lot. In the early 1980s, the government sponsored a public competition for a mixed-use commercial building that would provide additional gallery space for the National Gallery on its top floor. Representatives from the museum (who wanted the distinguished firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill) and outside assessors could not agree on an architect; finally, in 1983 revised plans submitted by the firm of Ahrends, Burton & Koralek were grudgingly accepted by all parties. All parties, that is, except the Prince of Wales. In an infamous speech to the Royal Institute of British Architects in May 1984, the fledgling architecture critic abandoned the usual royal pieties and denounced the design as a "monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend." Farewell, Ahrends, Burton &c. Then came the *dei ex machina*. In 1985, the three brothers Sainsbury, business magnates, offered to pay for a proper addition to the museum, skip the mixed-use commercial compromise. A worldwide search for an architect began, producing a short-list that included such luminaries as Henry Nichols Cobb of I. M. Pei and Partners, James Stirling, and Robert Venturi. The judges fell for the "gentle" postmodernism of Venturi. It turned out to have been a strikingly efficient choice. The Philadelphia-based architect and his associates quickly drew up plans and were able to begin construction in 1988. This past summer, the Sainsbury Wing of London's National Gallery opened on time, within budget, and to a veritable cataract of controversy.

Perhaps this was only to be expected. The architecture of the National Gallery has always attracted an abundance of criticism, even before it was really the National Gal-



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lery. Recalling the museum's first venue, when in the 1820s it occupied a townhouse at 100 Pall Mall, adjacent to its current location, the novelist Anthony Trollope described "a dingy, dull, narrow house, ill-adapted for the exhibition of the treasures it held." And in his monograph on the history of the museum and the Sainsbury Wing, the British architectural critic Colin Amery reports that "Poor Wilkins was criticized for everything" when his building was completed in the late 1830s.[1] So in one sense, it was only business as usual that Robert Venturi's design for an addition to the National Gallery should have occasioned heated controversy from the moment that his first sketches, carefully preserved scribbles made on menus from Pan Am's Clipper Class and the Savoy, were exhibited to the delight and rage of the British public several years ago. What provoked one wag to disparage Venturi's "Clipper-Class classicism" inspired others to excesses of praise.

Nevertheless, by the time the Sainsbury Wing opened, it had become clear that Venturi's building represented something more than just another chapter in the saga of the National Gallery. Not only is the Sainsbury Wing Venturi's most ambitious and high-profile project to date: it is also a kind of summary of the highly self-consciousness historicism that the architect has been advocating since his "gentle manifesto," *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, helped to usher in postmodernism in 1966. Undertaken at a moment when postmodernism was enjoying a last, intoxicated building spree, the Sainsbury Wing was completed in a period of aesthetic as well as economic stagnation. And while Venturi has obviously spared no trick to endow his new building with jauntiness and impish *esprit*—one observer, meaning to praise, described it as a "slice of beautifully iced cake"—the overall effect is disconcertingly retrospective, not to say valedictory. Just as Phillip Johnson's AT&T building stands as an inaugurating monument to postmodernist coquettishness—Miss Havisham before the wedding, as it were—so it is likely that the Sainsbury Wing will come to be seen as one of its terminal gestures: Miss Havisham in later years.

None of this is to deny that Venturi has brought considerable ingenuity and, in places, even discretion to his design. His building rises modestly to the same, relatively low, height as does Wilkins's original, and its front façade is clad in the same attractive Portland stone (other façades are faced in brick or glass). Venturi has also been generally well served by the craftsmen he employed. The stone work, especially the interior stone work, is exceptionally fine by today's standards. Indeed, many elements of the building, taken individually, are almost exquisitely accomplished. The most important success, or partial success, is the suite of sixteen galleries (about 15,000 square feet altogether) on the main floor, specifically designed to house the National Gallery's superb collection of early Renaissance paintings. In some ways, they are models of contemporary gallery design, well and evenly lighted, predominately by daylight from banks of clerestory windows. We are told that temperature and humidity are automatically and precisely controlled by computer to protect the fragile wood-panel paintings, and there is even a "micro gallery" on the floor below, full of computers waiting to dispense information about the collection to curious museumgoers. (To what extent the curious will substitute a stint in front of the computer for encounters with the works of art is another question.)

Technologically, anyway, the Sainsbury Gallery is something of a show piece. It is

1 *A Celebration of Art & Architecture: The National Gallery Sainsbury Wing*, by Colin Amery; National Gallery Publications, 144 pages, £25; £15.95 paper. Mr. Amery, one of the architectural consultants who recommended Venturi for the job, has really given readers two books here: a thoughtful and illuminating history of the evolution of the National Gallery from its inception in the 1820s up to the Sainsbury competition, followed by a lavish exercise in architectural cheerleading for Venturi. He is trustworthy up to about page 49.



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only architecturally that it fails. As with so much postmodern architecture, its chief problem is an excess of cleverness. This is evident everywhere, from the placement of doorways to the handling of the elevation. One of Venturi's favorite tricks is the diminishing perspective act. We get several versions of this in the main galleries. For example, both the magnificent Cima altarpiece, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (*c.* 1504), and Raphael's *Christ Crucified* (*c.* 1503) are framed by a series of arched doorways, each narrower than the one before, each echoing the shape of the painting. The result is that both look like images seen through the wrong end of a telescope.

Mr. Amery cites the enfilade galleries at Sir John Soane's great Dulwich Picture Gallery as a precedent—and ergo as a justification—for this melodramatic manipulation of perspective; but the difference is that Soane did not make his gallery into a circus funhouse of optical effects and gratuitous historical echoes. In fact, Venturi's use of diminishing perspective is a perfect illustration of what Robert Musil called the "secret law that will not permit man any kind of imitation without getting an exaggeration along with it." It's not the *idea* of enfilade galleries with diminishing perspectives that's a problem (here as elsewhere, Venturi's architecture is only too full of good ideas), it's the way they are realized by the architect. As Musil goes on to observe, "in bad epochs the most frightful buildings . . . are made according to principles exactly as beautiful as in the best epochs"—though whether bad epochs make bad architects or the other way around is worth debating.

In any event, the Sainsbury Wing is a graveyard of ideas gone awry. Some of them are details: the Tuscan columns that appear to have swollen ankles from standing too long on those hard museum floors; or the appalling iron work that seems to have been made by a cookie cutter (no wonder one of blacksmiths approached about the contract is reported to have refused to bid on the job); or the warren-like asymmetrical galleries for temporary exhibitions in the basement; or the grotesque, hypertrophied arches that float over the main stairway with mocking purposelessness.

One of the most spectacular failures in the building is the grand stairway itself. Set between a glass curtain wall that looks out upon the old Wilkins building and a stone wall punctuated with oversize windows and decorated with a frieze inscribed with the names of various Renaissance artists, the stairway is clearly meant to be an architectural statement of serious pretension. Mr. Amery compares it to the grand stairway at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich and tells us that the glass wall is "reminiscent" of Joseph Paxton's industrial-age architecture. One wonders what the large, stylized cornices that follow the stairway down to the basement level are reminiscent of: my candidates are the paintings of cornices and moldings by Roy Lichtenstein. "The stairway does offer its own surprises," Mr. Amery continues. "Look up from the bottom and sense the shortened perspective; look down and the staircase suddenly seems to be surprisingly long." Indeed, the sense of vertigo as one looks down is almost overwhelming, and one can only hope that the National Gallery has kept up its premiums for liability insurance. We might vary the title that Marcel Duchamp gave to one of his ready-mades and baptize this stairway "In Advance of a Broken Leg."

The exterior of the building is in many ways even worse. Here Venturi's addiction to cleverness, to cute historical quotation, to oblique stylistic allusion builds to a quiet frenzy of fatuity. He has exactly duplicated Wilkins's Corinthian capitals but has distributed the pilasters they adorn in coy disregard for symmetry and proportion. Mr. Amery dryly notes that "[t]he closely packed pilasters at the eastern end of the new façade look as though they have been drawn back and folded away, like a screen." Precisely! But an important public building is not a stage set, and its façade should not look like a folded screen. Venturi continues the string courses and balustrade from the old build-



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ing for a few yards and then stops. Why? He duplicates the blind windows from the old building but suddenly discontinues the molding after the second window. Why? As the façade stretches West toward Whitcomb Street it becomes blanker and blanker, finally dissolving into a flat sheet of stone. Why?

With the Sainsbury Wing, Venturi has given us a lavish example of what he called in *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) the "decorated shed." Strip off the Portland stone, take away the pietra serena columns and skirtings, and what do you have? An asymmetrical modern building distinguished by fancy air conditioning and lackluster proportions. The building itself betrays no architectural logic, no internal unity, no animating form. Its roughly six-sided shape is not so much a response to the irregular site as an exploitation of it; minus the postmodern appurtenances, the Sainsbury Wing is an unarticulated blob.

Some architectural writers distinguish between *decoration*, which is arbitrary and dispensable, and *ornament*, which has some organic connection to the structure it adorns and the purpose the building serves. Like all postmodernists, Venturi strives to turn architecture itself into a form of decoration. Inside and out, he has larded his building with architectural references—not only to Soane and Paxton and Wilkins, but also to Wren, to Lutyens, and to many classical Italian architects. Yet the references are essentially arbitrary, decorative. It is no wonder that the word "reminiscent" crops up so often in discussions of Venturi's work. He produces buildings that are *reminiscent* of all manner of past architecture but that somehow fail to achieve architectural status themselves. Unlike mere workaday structures, however, they are festooned with knowing allusions and reassuring materials. This is part of what gives them their appeal: the allusions are there for students of architecture, the pretty stone for the man in the street who has become bored with the glass boxes of modernist architecture and likes pastels.

Even before it had officially opened, the Sainsbury Wing was described by one critic as "the cruellest disappointment I have ever suffered as an architecture critic." Another writer countered by asking "Can London take a joke?"—the idea being of course that a joke is a capital thing. These responses are revealing. There can be little doubt that jokiness is at the heart of the Sainsbury Wing, even as it is at the heart of postmodernism generally. In this sense, postmodernism is the Pop Art of architecture: it is, as Phillip Johnson once put it, architecture with a giggle. But more perhaps than any other art, architecture can joke with impunity only when the underlying seriousness of its vocation is secure. Otherwise, what was intended as enlivening wit merely fosters a brittle self-consciousness and shallow cynicism: what was meant to be funny turns vapid, sour, pointless. And this is the unhappy lesson of the Sainsbury Wing: because architecture must finally be a serious pursuit if it is to be anything, its failures—its flirting with arbitrariness and obsession with irony—can indeed be cruel as well as disappointing. The same might be said of life, but that is another story.



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Art

# *Dis*modern

## *by Jed Perl*

Going to the Museum of Modern Art is something that many of us have been doing for almost as long as we've been alive. When we first went there as kids or adolescents, we accepted MOMA as an all-encompassing, almost undifferentiated experience—a saturation in images, images that were presented in a sequence of boxy white galleries. We went there for the total experience of modern art; exploring those galleries was like wandering through the mind of modern art. At MOMA, Picasso and Matisse and the Surrealists were things that we took in along with photography and architectural models, and it was no sin that great art and good taste went hand in hand. That the Modern was in midtown, in the midst of the bustle of the business and shopping districts, was important, too. When we went through the doors of MOMA, it was as if the real world ended and the realer world of art began. And somehow the heightened experience of art came to be associated with the heightened experience that was the city itself. To walk out of the Museum of Modern Art at rush hour, onto the surging sidewalks of midtown, is still an awesome experience.

Things other than art went on at MOMA, too. There was the cafeteria for snacks and the sculpture garden for daydreaming, and when you got to the point when you were into boy-girl things, you could go and pick up or be picked up in that sculpture garden, something that's become a cliché, a Woody Allen subject, but really happens, nonetheless. In short, MOMA was a part of life, and as you developed you could go to MOMA and think all sorts of thoughts, including ones about what modern art was and wasn't. The Modern's beautiful, sometimes seminal publications were the beginning of many a library of books about modern art. And if you kept learning about art, you would finally realize that MOMA was only one version of modern art, only part of the story. MOMA introduced us to Picasso and Matisse, and if it had not done so we could never have gone on to decide that *their* Picasso and Matisse were not necessarily ours, that perhaps we liked a lot of what they had excluded. The Modern presented a Great Tradition, and every such tradition has its predispositions and prejudices. Sometimes the Modern even created a stir by reacting against its own predispositions, as when it exhibited Beaux-Arts architectural drawings as a sort of critique of the museum's original less-is-more philosophy.

Practically since the museum was founded at the end of the 1920s, artists have been complaining that MOMA wasn't modern enough, that it was refusing to see what modern art really was. Decades ago, the American Abstract Artists group picketed the museum, angry that Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the museum's guiding spirit, saw modernism as almost exclusively European. The Modern's predisposition toward painterliness and Paris at the expense of international Constructivism was part of what galled the



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AAA, and this has turned out to be a lasting predisposition: it has had a profound impact on how the history of modern art has been written. One may also wonder how the history of modern art would look if MOMA had been more sympathetic to the representational strains in modern art in, say, 1920s Paris or 1950s New York. I frame these questions about modern art according to MOMA in terms of my own prejudices and predispositions; everybody has his own feelings about what MOMA has overemphasized or missed out on. There were always a lot of artists who found the Modern's exhibitions of good design a little—or even very—silly. Some have looked at the museum's forays into contemporary art—whether the "Information" show of 1970 or the "International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture" of 1984—and been horrified. Others have regretted, especially in recent years, that the museum hasn't been keeping up. Then again, as Kirk Varnedoe, the museum's Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture, discovered when he organized "High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture" last year, one can try to be hip and get shot down by the hipsters. SoHo's reaction to that show was, "How dare MOMA tell *us* about popular culture!"

Robert Storr, who was named a curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Modern just over a year ago, is forty years old, an age that would suggest that the museum is for him, as it is for a lot of us, both paradigm and dinosaur. Storr, who has in recent years gained something of a reputation as a critic and a curator, is now in the position to shape our perceptions of this institution which has shaped us all. I would expect that Storr, who was brought to the museum to focus on contemporary art, is in general agreement with the way the history of modern art is presented at MOMA. In his writings he has often supported contemporary artists who see themselves as responding in one way or another to some generally agreed upon idea of the modern tradition—an idea of the modern tradition that is spelled out at the Museum of Modern Art. But the first major exhibition that Storr has organized at MOMA, called "*Dis*locations," suggests that he believes that this modern tradition is not a prologue but a finished thing.[1] "*Dis*locations," which consists of seven installations by seven artists, isn't an exhibition that attempts to establish connections to MOMA modernism. The artists—they are Louise Bourgeois, Chris Burden, Sophie Calle, David Hammons, Ilya Kabakov, Bruce Nauman, and Adrian Piper—present their own values in conscious and even self-conscious opposition to MOMA modernism.

Even before Robert Storr's arrival at MOMA, it had been obvious that Kirk Varnedoe wanted to criticize the museum's grand-old-man role. Of the first three offerings in the "Artist's Choice" series, which brings artists into the museum to act as curators, only one, Ellsworth Kelly's 1990 "Fragmentation and the Single Form," has been an attempt to build on MOMA modernism. Scott Burton's 1989 show, "Burton on Brancusi," was a literal deconstruction: a number of Brancusis were separated from their bases. Earlier this year, Chuck Close stuffed so many images into one room for his show of portraits that it looked like the chock-a-block visuals of a cheapo auction house. Strangely, the Burton and Close shows were so much about imposing a personal vision on the Museum of Modern Art that they ended up by confirming the absoluteness of the Modern's viewpoint. There must be an alternative to deconstructing MOMA other than the sort of thing we got in the Kelly show, which was a rehash of MOMA formalism. But it seems that the artists whom MOMA looks to now accept MOMA modernism so absolutely that they can only absolutely accept it or absolutely reject it.

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1 "*Dis*locations" opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on October 20 and is on view through January 7, 1992. A fully documented catalogue of the exhibition, with an essay by Robert Storr, will be published this month by MOMA ($16.95 paper).



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"*Dis*locations" amounts to seven rejections, the frankest being Sophie Calle's installation, which is a sort of reversal of the "Artist's Choice" idea. Instead of bringing together works from the permanent collection in a new way, Calle calls our attention to a number of works that have been removed from the permanent collection. (The press publicity for the show hastens to assure us that these works are either in conservation or on loan, and will soon return.) Calle has replaced these modern icons with wall panels that consist of thumbnail sketches of the missing works and remarks that people on the museum staff have made about the originals. Visitors to the permanent collection come upon these wall exhibits and read them and laugh at the occasionally funny things the staffers have to say about, among others, a Seurat, a de Chirico, a Delvaux. One comment is from a staffer who once bought a postcard of the Seurat landscape to send to his or her father but never did, so that the Seurat always brings up in this person's mind a vague feeling of guilt. This is the kind of mild stuff of which Sophie Calle's installation is constructed. Yet "*Dis*locations" is not a mild show.

"*Dis*locations" takes up a hell of a lot of room at the Museum of Modern Art. It occupies all the basement exhibition space, a good deal of square-footage on the third floor, and spills through the galleries devoted to the permanent collection on the second floor. The artists gobble up space, or at least redecorate it. Adrian Piper uses lots of white formica. David Hammons uses lots of leaves and sandbags and confetti and balloons. Video and photography get into the act. Among the work included you'll find installations that talk, shriek, move, and even molt. You know that Storr and the artists are thinking big from the moment when you descend the escalator to the museum's basement galleries and hear a heavily amped male voice yelling "Feed me. Help me. Eat me. Hurt me." The voice comes from the mouth of a man whose bald head fills a number of video monitors and video wall projections that make up Bruce Nauman's *Anthro/Socio* installation. Nauman's piece is a gallery-devourer—it takes up almost as much space as it took last season to survey the lifework of the Russian Constructivist Liubov Popova. At "*Dis*locations," size counts. It's the artists'—and the curator's—way of telling us that the Modern has finally decided that contemporary art counts.

A writer close to Storr recently explained that the italics in the show's title are meant to "highlight a bit of African-American slang: 'Dis' meaning 'deliberate disrespect.' So a *dis*location would be any place of calculated affront to somebody's or something's dignity." Basically, the show is designed as an affront to the Museum of Modern Art's dignity—to the dignity of people like Varnedoe's predecessor, William Rubin, who dare to think that they have gathered together in one place something like the best of modern art. That huge dark video chamber of Nauman's isn't so much a free-standing statement as it is a dissing of things we've seen in these galleries before—of "Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism," of "Paul Klee," of "Le Douanier Rousseau" and many more. Calle's installation in the permanent collection is a more literal version of dissing. I don't think that a little dissing is necessarily a bad thing; there have been days when I've found MOMA's view of modernism—even MOMA's view of Matisse and Braque—so stale, I could have done a little dissing myself. We've all grown up with the Museum of Modern Art, and at times we want and need to get mad at the museum. But it's natural that those who are witnessing the protests are going to ask the protesters what they can offer us in place of the dignity they're mocking. This is where the evasiveness of "*Dis*locations" comes into play.

Critics, pro and con, emphasize the content of "*Dis*locations." One writer observed that "the show comes at you from all sides, often with the tribulations of war, colonialism, racial prejudice, childhood pain, memory and simple human existence utmost on its mind." These are the business-as-usual



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themes of late-1980s and early-1990s art, and the seven installations are conventional run-throughs of these themes, presented in the minimalist or happening styles that were first seen in the 1960s and 1970s and have now become new versions of retro style. (It should be noted that many of the artists included in this show are not young, and actually first came to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s. As for Louise Bourgeois, the beginnings of her career date back to the 1930s.) David Hammons's installation, with a photographic mock-up of an equestrian statue of Theodore Roosevelt surrounded by sandbags, a machine gun, and a lot of other stuff, is an Allan Kaprow retread; Adrian Piper's white room with a video of a black man saying, "I'm not sneaky, I'm not scary . . ." is politicized Minimalism, as is Chris Burden's *Other Vietnam Memorial*, a giant copper Rolodex engraved with Vietnamese names; Ilya Kabakov's wrecked meeting room is more Allan Kaprow stuff; and Louise Bourgeois's kinetic phallic gas tanks are more Sixties brutalism. I'm emphasizing style over content, because it's mostly the artists' stylistic choices that make an impression at "*Dis*locations." Going through the show, I didn't find myself thinking very much about sex or race or class. I find that the politics that dominates "*Dis*locations" is art-world politics—the politics of who will shape the Museum of Modern Art. Race, gender, imperialism are merely the ordinary topics of contemporary art, in this sense no more or less worthy than the ordinary topics of the art of a hundred years ago, which were, come to think of it, not that different: orientalism, motherhood, imperialism (seen then from the victor's point of view).

At the heart of "*Dis*locations" is an utterly weird phenomenon: the institution that's being dislocated is giving dignity to the dislocators. This is the most significant political transaction that is going on here; and to the pro-"*Dis*locations" crowd that says the exhibition is a triumph for progressive social politics, I say that the whole enterprise is cynical, that legitimate social issues are being used as a smoke screen for what is basically art-world politics. Kirk Varnedoe, who hired Storr, is a man who desperately wants to turn the Museum of Modern Art into the hot museum of contemporary art. He needs to do this, because contemporary art is where the money and the glamour are. So Robert Storr has brought in seven artists to dis the Museum of Modern Art. The Modern becomes hip. And in exchange the Modern bestows upon the artists the very dignity they are there to dis. And everybody's happy.

Installation art has always been about takeovers, about radical transformations. Claes Oldenburg's *Store*, Gordon Matta-Clark's split houses, Walter de Maria's *New York Earth Room*: these are about something dramatic that is done to an environment. I think that these gestures, even when they are amusing or provocative, are so broad as to defy sustained attention. Nonetheless, I think that installations can have the impact of diverting theatrical events, and as such add something to the sum of our experience. But when the image of the museum becomes the thing that is being taken over or transformed, we have to ask ourselves exactly what is being lost and what is being gained. Adrian Piper's video installation makes a legitimate point about black rage and white racism; yes, many people would look at the black man in this video and think, simply because he is black, that he's sneaky, he's scary . . . But Piper's point could be made as easily—and would reach more people—on a series of posters in the subway. Taking up an entire room at the Modern, Piper's installation isn't so much a statement against racism as a statement against the complex self-contained world that is the work of art—any work of art. Judged as art, the Piper—and all the rest of the stuff in this show—is, even if we give it the benefit of the doubt, just too slight and overblown to deserve this exposure. And the shock value that political art can sometimes have is diminished in the museum context. What the artists in "*Dis*locations" are really



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doing is aestheticizing politics, and then using this aestheticized politics as a battering ram with which to gain access to the museum. With Storr in charge, the museum is lying down and playing dead for these artists.

Museums rarely have known what to do with contemporary art. William Rubin's several attempts to present Frank Stella as the heir to MOMA's traditions were farfetched, contrived, deeply academic. The Museum of Modern Art was invented, in some sense, as a retrospective adventure, and its finest moments have always been in that spirit. The many newer museums that have arisen in the Modern's long shadow are all attempts to deal with the problem of how the mission of the museum, which is essentially one of preservation, can be reconciled with a lively interest in the art of the present. There are things that will never be comfortable in a museum. Don Judd's work, for instance, which comes out of an installation sensibility, only looks effective when the artist has total control—as he does when he has a one-man show in a gallery. How art ends up in the museums is an imperfect process at best; but in spite of all the violence done in the name of making museums more contemporary, I would not say that they should ignore the art of the present. Every once in a while something important and contemporary gets into a museum, and those occasions, however infrequent, when the tradition connects with the present, must remain possibilities.

For all I know, Robert Storr will next present us with a MOMA show of paintings on canvas, of sculptures on pedestals. I would not put it past him to turn around and present himself as a defender of tradition. A painter I know remarked, on hearing about the plans for "*Dis*locations," "Oh, you mean to say that the Modern has a new curator of painting and sculpture and his first show isn't painting and isn't sculpture." Storr is a man who is clever enough to have taken that complaint into consideration. "*Dis*locations" is the essential dramatic opening career move; beyond this, I expect that Storr has all the bases covered. He likes to make contributions to symposia and magazines in defense of the artist's freedom of speech. (This is perfectly fine, and takes about as much courage as defending apple pie in Middle America.) He's also a formalist who is eager to explicate a contemporary concept of a late style, with examples gleaned from the work of Philip Guston and Willem de Kooning. Storr will probably have a long and successful career at the Museum of Modern Art. He couldn't have had a better start than "*Dis*locations," for here he has delivered to his director and his trustees the show they've longed for: an exhibition that at last makes MOMA a leader on the contemporary scene. Move over Whitney, the Modern has arrived. And when the Modern goes contemporary, it does so with an élan, a kind of money, an aura of independence that's way beyond the Whitney.

With the Modern coming down with what may be a chronic case of hipness, we can only thank our lucky stars that Alfred H. Barr, Jr., William Rubin, and the rest of the people who have made the museum what it is had such a rock-solid idea of what they were about. Their modernist orthodoxy is anything but the full story of modern art, and I for one do not think that they should ever be forgiven their acceptance of Pop Art, their glorification of the Abstract Expressionists, their trivializing and fashion-following. This museum, in spite of all its white rooms, has never been lily white. But whatever the complicated transactions that have gone on between the Modern and the wider art scene, the people who were in charge at MOMA for half a century managed to build a great orthodox institution: the Museum of Modern Art provides us with a way of making sense of art. We may rebel against the orthodoxy, but we can never forget it, because it is rooted in that extraordinary permanent collection that we go away from and come back to and measure ourselves and our knowledge against for as long as we care about modern art. I'd seen "*Dis*locations" on opening night, when the whole world was there. I went back late on a Monday



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afternoon, when the galleries weren't crowded at all. Some people had clearly come that Monday afternoon to see "*Dis*-locations," but I think that far more people were there to see the permanent collection, to see the Picassos and Matisses and Mondrians and Klees. Chances are that in the coming years the Modern's permanent collection is going to look like a monument under siege. But who can doubt that this collection will remain, despite the assaults of Sophie Calle, Scott Burton, and whoever else, New York City's number one monument to modern art? And who can doubt that we will keep going there and drawing our own conclusions? It's a monument that can make the dislocators of this world look very, very small. Robert Storr may hold a distinguished position at the Museum of Modern Art, but even in its degenerated state the institution towers so high above him, it leaves him looking like a dust speck.

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## Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

Stuart Davis at the Met *by Hilton Kramer*
The New York of Dawn Powell *by Lauren Weiner*
Calder at the Whitney *by Karen Wilkin*
Anthony Trollope *by Roger Kimball*
"Circa 1492" *by Creighton Gilbert*
Fiction chronicle *by Bruce Bawer*
The Morgan Beatus *by Deborah Rosenthal*
Mordecai Richler's war *by Julian Symons*



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Theater

# Smorgasbord

*by Donald Lyons*

This month's selection from New York's fall buffet: an old Irish play, a new Irish play, an old English play, and three new American plays.

Shaw was eighty when, in 1936, he started writing *Geneva*, a sort of morality play in which representatives of political forces of the time are summoned by the League of Nations' International Committee for Intellectual Co-operation, which was itself located in Geneva, to the Hague to be submitted to the scrutiny of a Judge of the Court of International Justice. *Geneva* was to go through at least eight versions, one as late as 1945, as Shaw scrambled to keep it timely and politically correct. It was staged first in 1938 in Warsaw, then in London in 1938 and in New York in 1940. It was widely received as an embarrassing failure, and so it is, but the modes of its badness are curious enough to merit the recent revival at the Jean Cocteau Repertory.

I learn with delight from the third and final installment of Michael Holroyd's Shaw biography that the Committee for Intellectual Co-operation was not a Shavian concoction but an actual arm of the League of Nations chaired successively, in the 1920s, by Henri Bergson and Gilbert Murray. Murray, the classicist and pacifist whom Shaw had drawn on for the character of Adolphus Cusins in *Major Barbara* (1905), actually declared that the Geneva palavering of his group was "rather like a Shaw play" and asked Shaw to join. Shaw demurred but was in the fullness of time to set *Geneva* in the bosom of the Committee.

As judiciously trimmed at the Cocteau, *Geneva* consists of an act of complaints at Geneva and an act of judgment at the Hague. The first complainant is called "The Jew"; he demands the arrest of the Dictator who has expropriated him and is bent on his extermination. Here is his self-presentation: "My hair is not black, nor do I wear it in excessively oiled ringlets. I have all the marks of a German blond. German is my native language: in fact I am in every sense a German. But I worship in the synagogue; and when I worship I put my hat on, whereas a German takes it off. On this ground they class me as a non-Aryan, which is nonsense, as there is no such thing as an Aryan." The inadequacy of this (and there is much worse I might cite) is manifold. The jaunty tone of paradox shows an aloof insensitivity to the realities of *any* moment from 1936 to 1945. More revealing is the Shavian-Stalinist horror of difference: it is not allowed that people might be culturally or spiritually different while retaining a human inviolability. No, difference is a silly triviality (the interlocutor of the Jew, an English typist, compares the factionalism of two London suburbs), a momentary failure in the homogenizing march of rationality. The second complainant is the flamboyant widow of a Central American caudillo who has murdered her husband's mistress; the sole function of this superfluous personage is to utter



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a few paradoxes about the unwritten law from a woman's point of view.

Shaw wakes up somewhat in the next bit, where an Anglican bishop complaining about his footman going Red is confronted with a Russian Commissar complaining about his housekeeper being subverted by "tribal superstitions of the most barbarous kind . . . human sacrifices"—i.e., Christianity. The lucid Commissar sweetly gets the better of the apoplectic cleric, who drops dead. Final figures in the first part are the Blimp-like Sir Orpheus Midlander, the British Foreign Secretary, and Begonia Brown, a jingoistic Englishwoman who will rise from typist to MP to PM (Holroyd sees Begonia as a prophetic intuition of Mrs. Thatcher, while she is simply a hit at Lady Astor). Shaw has his usual fun with English stupidity and hypocrisy here, but the characters are dim and the targets easy.

Things pick up at the Hague, where Italy's Bombardone, Germany's Battler, and Spain's Flanco de Fortinbras strut about under the eye of the Judge, a Shavian raisonneur who compares his function to that of the old ecclesiastical excommunicators—ineffective but troublesome. Though Shaw backs the Judge, as he did earlier avatars like Caesar and King Magnus, he really comes to life in sketching the lurid villainy of Bombardone. He dishes democracy ("Where there is no leader, no king, no priest, nor any body of law established by dead kings and priests, you have mob law, lynching law, gangster law: in short, American democracy. Thank your stars you have never known democracy in England"—this whole passage was timorously [?] skipped at the Cocteau, I am sorry to say) and salivates over war ("War stimulates population. . . . Women cannot resist the soldier: they despise the coward. Death, the supreme danger, rouses life to its supreme ecstasy of love. When has a warlike race ever lacked children?"). Bombardone is a faint echo of the Devil in *Man and Superman*. The Franco character is the traditional thrasonical military braggart with a clerical spin; he does, accurately enough, manifest greater savoir and skin-saving slipperiness than the other two. The Hitler character, Battler, is simply a glum Costello to Bombardone's Abbott, his utterances consisting of puerile I-can-do-worse toppers: Bombardone rejoices in warriors' deaths and Battler suggests, "Kill the women"; Bombardone threatens eight million bayonets and Battler answers with twelve. That is, Shaw cannot imagine Hitler at all. Real evil was beyond his chipper Enlightenment ken. Tellingly, he simply avoids confronting Battler with the Jew—a confrontation the dramaturgy demands. Faced with evil, Shaw either endorsed it as rational (Stalin) or trivialized it (Battler).

The Judge experiences a Shotover-like spasm of despair at the haplessness of humankind: "Man is a failure as a political animal. The creative forces which produce him must produce something better." He calls for the "immediate execution" of all the scoundrels before him. (The wholly admirable Commissar has just boasted of shooting dozens of "conspirators" a month in Russia. A certain Shavian bloodthirstiness is visible in *Geneva*.) The Judge, relenting, announces news of a global cooling and the end of human life. Reactions are in character: Battler pities his dog; Flanco calls the Vatican; Commissar calls Moscow. Sir Orpheus will order the Royal Astronomer to hush up the news. The Judge rejoices in the mere existence of his tribunal: "They came. They came."

The play is a misbegotten jumble of familiar attitudes and grotesquely ill-fitting topicalities, although some critics solemnly compare it to Plato's *Republic* and to Aristophanes. What it does provide is a laboratory demonstration of the limitations of the Shavian sensibility. As such, Casey Kizziah's briskly directed production was of considerable interest. The Cocteau is to be saluted for their originality and bold eccentricity. Let them indeed venture into *more* late Shaw, whose very next play, *In Good King Charles's Golden Days* (1939), is a crepuscular masterpiece of tolerance and amorous charm and intellectual liveliness whose very sweetness seems a recovery from the purged poisons of *Geneva*.



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Another Irish playwright, Brian Friel, is currently represented up on Broadway by *Dancing at Lughnasa*. The production enlists mainly Irish artists from the Abbey, where *Dancing* was given its première in 1990. The play deals with five unmarried sisters near a Donegal village in the summer of 1936, and it is the lovely, quicksilver interplay between the five actresses that is its triumph: Rosaleen Linehan as the eldest, tut-tutting, prim-and-proper, matriarchal Kate; Dearbhla Molloy as lively and humorous Maggie; Catherine Byrne as Christine, unwed mother of Michael, the little boy who, in the person of a grown actor (Gerard McSorley), narrates the action somewhat in the manner of *Our Town*'s Stage Manager; Bríd Brennan as still but deep Agnes; Bríd Ní Neachtain as simple Rose. Patrick Mason, an Abbey veteran, directs with an eye to keeping the tensions and releases sharp and clear; the deflating humor that laces the melancholy always come through. Joe Vaněk's set seems, however, to quit naturalism for the symbolic subtext a bit too facilely: a hilltop and a cornfield uselessly dominate some half the stage.

*Dancing* strives to show the liberating power of music in the lives of these variously thwarted women—and in the lives of two dim men: a brother priest back from years as a missionary in Africa and a feckless gallant who has romanced Christine and fathered Michael. A radio set brings the pop music of the Thirties into the air. The dancing gallant twirls more than one sister in smooth provincial homage to Astaire and Rogers; popular lyrics form a virtual second tongue.

But Friel has a deeper, more subversive use for music: it is the season of Lughnasa, harvest festival of the pagan corn god, Lugh (Kate had vetoed calling the radio "Lugh"). There is talk of the sisters' going to the harvest dance of thanksgiving to Lugh atop the nearby hill. Agnes is for it, while Kate is aghast: "Mature women dancing?" But the rhythm of Lugh gathers strength within the women until, in a moment of Dionysiac possession (which perhaps comes too early in the play), they yield to it, even Kate, and dance to Lugh. The thrust of this (Christianity = constriction; paganism = release) is reinforced, somewhat tediously, in the second act when Father Jack lets it out that he has become a convert to Obi, the great goddess of the Swahili culture, whose "really magnificent ceremonies" feature lepers dancing for days drunk on palm wine. In Africa, the nuclear family is dissolved in polygamy and "a family is a small commune." Some fun is had with Jack's apostasy, but one is in no doubt about Friel's endorsement of it.

Friel is routinely compared to Chekhov, and this play seems to beg to be called *The Five Sisters*. But the comparison is misguided (not to mention premature). *Dancing* seems to me rather to suggest at once Neil Simon, James Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence. A boy's coming of age in a wacky, grimly dysfunctional family full of unmarried spinsters—this is the territory of *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, or, for that matter, of Clifford Odets in *Awake and Sing*. But Friel is a tougher writer than those Americans. For one thing, he has the example behind him of Joyce's making art of wrecked Irish lives (I think particularly of *Dubliners*). For another, he has the reality of Ireland in front of him. The play's most heartbreaking moment is the boy's foretelling of the harrowing fates in store for his mother and four aunts. Too much, one reacts, but Ireland . . .

The script's weakest side is the willed philopaganism centering on Lugh and Obi, reminiscent of Lawrence's prolix attempt in *The Plumed Serpent* to resuscitate Quetzalcoatl, the Toltec maize god. The embittered, negative view of Catholicism is a given in modern Irish writing, but the reach for a positive is shaky here. Spiritual health cannot be recovered, save at the typewriter, through the cultivation of antiquarian fantasies and naïvely utopian idealizations. That said, Friel remains a compelling auditor of life.

The Roundabout was a meat-and-potatoes company that used to do workmanlike revivals of such middlebrow American plays as Odets's *Country Girl* downtown. Now



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they've moved to Broadway, to the amphitheatrically awful Criterion Center Stage Right (in what I'm told used to be a disco) and they're staging Harold Pinter's 1965 play, *The Homecoming*. Progress this ain't. Director Gordon Edelstein has monumentally misconceived the enterprise from the start. He directs as if supervising Racine in a provincial lycée: characters stand or sit rooted and glower or stare; conversation is desultory; pregnant pauses stretch out for the full nine months. One counts the spotlights for the third time and dreams of dinner. Edelstein has been awed by the text and, instead of pepping it up, has surrendered to the famous "menace" and "atmosphere." The set is of an unbelievably dour and dumpy brownness. The actors include Yanks Lindsay Crouse, Jonathan Hogan, and Reed Diamond and Brits Roy Dotrice and Daniel Gerroll. The Yanks struggle with ugly North London accents. All are sluggishly immobilized in the circumambient murk.

But perhaps on reflection Edelstein is not really at fault. There *is* no other way to take Pinter than at face value. In this play a creepy English family—butcher father, pimp son, boxer son, professor of philosophy son—turn the philosopher's wife into a willing whore. F. R. Leavis used to invoke the Lawrence phrase about "doing dirt on life" to criticize Djuna Barnes and Henry Miller, both of whom seem far less deserving of the reproach than Pinter, for whom the words might have been invented (perhaps the prize exhibition here is the constant filth heaped upon the butcher's dead wife and mother of the boys).

The nastiness of Pinter's content is, if anything, surpassed by the banality of his form. Insipid repetition is erected into a maddening principle: "I hear a tick." "Is it a clock?" "Must be."—"Take a sip." "I've had enough." "Take a sip."—"Who took my cheese roll?" "I took your cheese roll." "Why did you take my cheese roll?" Repartee is systematically emptied of life. It plays like Noël Coward ("Very flat, Norfolk") on Thorazine. What surprises about Pinter today is not the snide suggestiveness (that quickly bores) but a certain timidity, a furtiveness, a cowardly shying away from its own darkness. Pinter took the ferociously misanthropic voice of Beckett and suburbanized it, trimming it to the half-baked confines of radio soap opera. The anemic meanness of Pinter leaves the anarchic farce of Joe Orton (just to talk of English theatrical upstarts of the Sixties) looking positively Rabelaisian.

*Servy-n-Bernice 4Ever* is a new romantic comedy being produced at the Provincetown Playhouse under the direction of Terry Kinney, a "co-founder and acting member" of Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre, where he has acted and directed since 1976. Kinney was recently on Broadway as the Preacher in *The Grapes of Wrath*. This play has a Kinney/Steppenwolf signature: the playing space is cracklingly alive at every second; characters are kinetic units of attraction or repulsion, concealment or openness, paranoid bundles of nerves. (The contrast to *The Homecoming* is total.) This Chicago kind of theatrical tension is, of course, a descendant of Group Theatre realism in the Thirties and of Kazanian Expressionism in the Fifties. Like all styles, it has its vices and excesses—the incessantly snarling pitbulls that pass for people in the drama of David Mamet are a degenerate instance of it. But it is Kinney's exhilarating accomplishment here to mold the energies into subtly varied shapes: not just anger but despair, love, self-criticism, racial honesty. Seth Zvi Rosenfeld's brilliant script is couched entirely in demotic street idiom, but never indulges that idiom for mere shock or cheap thrill. The story centers on two interracial New York couples. The supporting couple are a rich white girl and a street black; their relationship is essentially comic foil and wallows joyously in the coarsest stereotypes. Pretty Cynthia Nixon and Erik King play them with spirit. The main couple are Servy, a white petty thief (always talking, though, about going to get his degree in social welfare) from the Lower East Side, and Bernice, his black childhood sweetheart whose at-



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tempt to break into modeling has been thwarted by an abusive swain and who summons Servy back into her life. What we see is basically the mating dance of these two wounded birds as they battle their own shames and insecurities toward a very uncertain love. The second scene of the first act, in which the two get reacquainted after years apart (he's been in jail), is so funny, so sexy, so powerful that the rest of the play has to exert itself to keep on this level of intensity. The factor of race is both omnipresent on stage and rather absent from the dialogue; these two know each other so well, are from the same neighborhood, know so much about the respective pathologies of their family situations, that the racial difference is in a way the least of their problems. This is—in a thrilling, but never complaisant, way—a post-race play. The wound-up street type Servy is the gem of the script and is perfectly played by Ron Eldard (he was in the movie *True Love*) as a mix of Stanley Kowalski, Ralph Kramden, and a little kid. Critics largely dismissed the play and seemed especially severe upon the "irrational" angers and hesitancies and moods of Bernice and upon the lack of focus they saw in the attractive Lisa Gay Hamilton, who plays her. I found both Bernice and Hamilton three-dimensional, credible, and sympathetic. There is, in fact, a vein of poetic dreaming in Rosenfeld's women that his beaten-down materialistic men seem to lack. Seth Zvi Rosenfeld has written one of the best American plays in years.

*Servy* is the kind of really knowledgeable, savvy, smart ethnic urban romance that John Patrick Shanley's movie *Moonstruck* got credit for being a few years back. Shanley has now directed his own new play, *Beggars in the House of Plenty*, at the Manhattan Theatre Club. It is a bilious indictment of his unloving Irish Catholic Bronx 1950s family and environment, a bit as if Edmund Tyrone and not Eugene O'Neill were to write *Long Day's Journey into Night* in the idiom of Paddy Chayevsky's *Marty*. In the first part of *Beggars*, younger son Johnny, who is, like Michael in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the narrator, is an infant pyromaniac driven to arson by inarticulate rage at his eccentrically rebarbative household: a screwball mother; a brutal butcher dad (butcher dads are big this season) wielding a cleaver; a sailor brother back from exotic parts with useless gifts and a broken spirit; a bigoted nun aunt who foists rosary beads on everybody. In case you didn't get the picture, Bing Crosby's recording of "White Christmas" is played loudly for ironic underlining, and a blasphemous Hail Mary is intoned by the family. We are visiting, in short, not so much the Bronx as the Borough of Self-Pity, at the intersection of Blame-Your-Family Concourse and Bash-the-Church Boulevard. Alas for Shanley, hordes of playwright-locusts have been swooping down on this site in recent years and there are no dramatic blueberries left to pick.

Things get grimmer in the play's second half. Johnny is in his twenties; both he and his feckless, friendless brother hang around the house watching TV. They have a long and affecting scene of mutual recognition —a scene not without debt to the Edmund-Jamie confrontation in *Long Day's Journey* but with some fresh paint. Then we go to the basement where Pop emerges from the furnace (= Hell, get it?) aglow with homicidal frenzy. "He's a demon," opines older brother Joey. "A demon?" Johnny sarcastically answers in his deadpan way. He keeps up the sarcasm as Pop does indeed take on satanic trapping, and asks, "What are you, some kind of Celtic rampaging fuckface?" After Pop "crushes" Joey, Johnny's tone changes: "I will never think of you without being shocked by your lovelessness." Shanley's dramaturgical *bêtise* in this part is to have dragged his subtext up into the literal text. Pop as diabolic assassin of the family violates the naturalistic surface with no compensatory gain, for Shanley has neither imagination enough to furnish a Strindbergian Theater of the Id (furnaces, rifles, and cellars are his clichéd décor) nor language enough to animate it (as seen above, his range is exhausted by the witless wisecrack and the



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inert diagnosis). This clumsily written tantrum is well performed by Dana Ivey as Ma, Daniel von Burgen as Pop, and Jon Tenney as Joey. Johnny is Loren Dean, who brings a kind of John Garfield weight to what is basically a wide-eyed-male-ingénue, will-you-look-at-these-fruitcakes-around-here role of the sort Matthew Broderick often plays.

Bonus question of the month: what do Spartacus, Tom Paine, and Jane Austen have in common? They're all Howard Fast heroes. Fast has written a two-character play, *The Novelist*, now in a lifeless production at the Ensemble Studio Theatre, in which Austen, a "virgin" of forty-one, is wooed and won by a dashing naval captain of forty-five. She shows him the manuscript of *Persuasion* (not actually so titled by her, but let that pass). He is displeased, finding its lovers Anne and Wentworth two witless virgins and its authoress "terrified of sex and bed." She soon agrees, confessing she has wasted her life writing lifeless and juiceless books, doing "too much dreaming and too little living." Captain Tom captures her shy heart, declaring "I love you, Jane Austen, for one hour of your company I'd gladly see the whole fleet sunk and the Empire lost." Before they can have sex, he, alas, is called to sea when Napoleon escapes from Elba (I presume to fight the naval battle of Waterloo). When he returns, she is perishing but leaves him a letter belittling those "entertainments that were a substitute for life" while rejoicing in the fact that "at the end I discovered life."

The vulgar impudence of the assumption that a "virgin" knows not life I leave to gender-students to deal with. The brazen effrontery of the presumption that Jane Austen could have had anything to learn about life or sex or the English Navy from the author of *Spartacus* I leave to the common reader to deal with. This writer found Fast "as absurd as he had hoped, and he listened to him with the keenest enjoyment, maintaining at the same time the most resolute composure of countenance." The words are those of poor old Austen describing Mr. Bennet's first exposure to Mr. Collins.

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Books

# Connoisseur of madness, addict of suicide

*by John Simon*

It is strange to contemplate the destinies of America's three most prominent women poets of the post-Bogan-Bishop generation: Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Anne Sexton. Two of them committed suicide; the third, Adrienne Rich, had a husband who did. Rich eventually turned into the most militant of lesbian feminists, refusing even to talk to men, except on business matters.

I met Plath only once. She was with Peter Davison, the editor-poet, her then lover; we were waiting to get into the Brattle Theater, just off Harvard Square. During a brief conversation, Miss Plath impressed me as rather plain under her defiantly blondined hair, but lively enough for a Smith girl, a part she looked to a "T." Adrienne Cecile Rich, a Radcliffe undergraduate, signed up for a poetry course given by Archibald Macleish, in which I was her section man, though not for long. She complained to me, and doubtless also to Macleish, that the course wasn't stimulating enough, and that, as winner of that year's Yale Younger Poet award, she was not shown sufficient consideration. Soon she dropped the course. Some time later, after a poetry reading by Rich, a Radcliffe dean asked me for my opinion. I allowed as how, to appreciate it fully, one would have needed the combined attributes of Homer and Beethoven, namely blindness and deafness.

Anne Sexton and I met twice. Once in a Harvard Square hangout, where I spent a couple of hours with three closely linked poets, Maxine Kumin, Anne Sexton, and George Starbuck, the latter two lovers at the time. My recollections are dim, but I remember enjoying Kumin most: she was warm and straightforward, as on all subsequent occasions we met. Starbuck was clever in a somewhat brittle way; Sexton was rather quiet. She was a handsome woman who seemed, even sitting down, quite tall; I now read with surprise that she was only 5' 7½". Still, to seem tall is much the same as being tall, even as, psychiatry tells us, to believe you were raped in childhood by your father is emotionally tantamount to having been. Anne Sexton claimed only to have been molested by her dad, and even about this she kept changing her story, so that many doubt that anything happened. Diane Wood Middlebrook, the author of *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, believes it did take place, because it makes a compelling cause for Sexton's lifelong hysteria.[1] True, but so could many another thing.

The second time I met Anne Sexton was when I introduced her at a poetry reading at the 92nd Street Y. I may not have presented her in sufficiently glowing terms, for she gave me a rather funny look as she stepped up to the lectern. But then, as she herself knew very well, one of her symptoms was a preternatural need to be loved by everyone

1 *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, by Diane Wood Middlebrook; A Peter Davison Book/Houghton Mifflin, 488 pages, $24.95.



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all the time, and my introduction was not a declaration of love. She again struck me as conspicuously tall. Her biographer mentions high heels, but not extra-high ones. Mrs. Middlebrook does, however, recount an incident when Anne, age thirteen or fourteen, put on bright lipstick and high heels to vamp her visiting brother-in-law and his male friends. His name was Brad Jealous, which must have made elder sister Jane, Mrs. Jealous, a jealous Mrs.

*Nomen est omen.* Names in Anne Sexton's life have a peculiar aptness, starting with her own. A sexton is a minor church official in charge of ringing the bell for services, and of digging graves. With a curious blend of self-promotion and self-destructiveness, Anne Sexton was given to publicizing herself in often outrageous ways while also plotting, practicing up for, and finally perfecting her death—an expert at summoning people to worship at her shrine and at digging her own grave. Her husband, the wool merchant Alfred Muller Sexton II, was nicknamed Kayo as a baby, after a character in the comic strip *Moon Mullins.* Still, the word means knockout, and during the twenty-four years of their marriage Kayo and Anne exchanged many a well-aimed blow, physical and psychological. Eventually, by divorcing him, Anne delivered the knockout punch; but by not being able to survive without his steadying influence, she proclaimed, in effect, his victory on a technical K.O.

Nothing much can be made of the name of her father, Ralph Churchill Harvey, who prospered in the wool business; but Anne's mother was always called, by both name and middle name, Mary Gray. (Anne's own full maiden name was Anne Gray Harvey.) Mary Gray, though in various ways a good mother, had something cold, distant, gray about her. And when it came to be Anne's turn, with her daughters Linda and Joy, there was plenty of grayness to Anne Gray's mothering, too. Most important to the growing Anne was her proximity to her maternal great-aunt, Anna Ladd Dingley, known as Nana. It is with the spinster Nana that she had, or believed she had, a quasi-sexual relationship—a Nana who, by the way, ended up hospitalized with mental illness. "Dingley" suggests ding-a-ling or dingbat to me, and when I read about Anne's supposed un-innocent cuddling with Nana, I can't help recalling the sheepdog Nana in Barrie's *Peter Pan*, who acts as a nuzzling nursemaid to Wendy and her siblings.

Anne Sexton was, for almost all her adult life, in psychotherapy of some kind, indeed in and out of mental hospitals and sanatoriums. The stays were usually quite short and generally voluntary, but what makes them particularly disturbing is that they tended to follow on suicide attempts. Both the elder of Anne's sisters, Jane, and an aunt, Frances, were suicides. Heavy drinking surrounded Anne: her father and father-in-law were borderline alcoholics—as, in his way, was Kayo. Mary Gray, though always steady on her feet, was a steady drinker as well. Anne herself became more and more of an alcoholic with the years, and some of the drunken fights between her and Kayo must have been grotesque and horrible.

Sexton's history with her various doctors also exhibits bizarre features. Her first therapist, Dr. Martha Brunner-Orne, eventually passed her on to her son, Dr. Martin Orne, in whose care she remained for the next eight years, after which Orne moved to Philadelphia. But he would come back for monthly follow-up sessions with Anne and other Boston patients. If no one else was momentarily available, Dr. Brunner-Orne would get back into the act, notably when Anne needed hospitalization, for which she would usually go to Westbrook Lodge, run by Brunner-Orne. Sexton, a promiscuous woman, duly fell in love with Dr. Orne, who ornerily and properly resisted her, and got her to become a writer, which proved her salvation. Later she wrote him, "Of course, I love you; / You lean above the plastic sky, / god of our block, prince of all the foxes." (What plastic sky, incidentally, and why above, not beneath? To rhyme with "love"?)



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But Dr. Orne also made tapes of their sessions, and had Sexton listen to them and provide oral or written comments. These, with the approval of Anne's family—specifically daughter Linda, Anne's executor—the doctor later turned over to the biographer. This was to cause a major posthumous brouhaha in the Sexton story. Should a therapist, under any circumstances, make such material available? In view of how public Anne made her private life, and how hungry she was for every kind of publicity, no breach of etiquette suggests itself to me. The only problem to my mind is what dull reading excerpts from the tapes make in Middlebrook's biography.

I do not accuse the poet herself of dullness; it is just that scrutiny and dissemination of pathological problems in great detail cannot help being boring, and have caused, as it were, a decline in the quality of madness. When poets (and others) of former ages became seriously deranged—say, Christopher Smart, John Clare, Hölderlin, Nerval—lack of drearily probed symptoms allowed them to preserve some dignity even in their most irrational behavior. When every last and least aspect of a Sexton's malady and therapy becomes an open book, it becomes very tempting to slam that book shut.

With her next therapist, Sexton was both luckier and less lucky. Mrs. Middlebrook had to protect him with a pseudonym, and calls him Dr. Ollie Zweizung, the last name derived from the German for two-tongued, i.e., double-dealing. For the married Dr. Zweizung became Sexton's lover, right there in the therapeutic sessions for which Anne—or, rather, her husband and family—had to pay. The supreme irony is that whereas Dr. Orne turned Sexton on to poetry, it was Sexton who turned Dr. Zweizung on to it, and forthwith the therapeutic lovers were toasting each other in verse. Middlebrook reports with a straight face: "She had felt very proud . . . when [Zweizung] suggested that she move to the couch, since she considered that a sign of progress." Yes, but toward what? I am reminded of the famous schoolboy boner, "The Templar asked Rebecca to be his mistress. The brave girl reclined to do so."

When Robert Clawson, a high-school English teacher and Sexton fan, drove the poet to a literary conference in East Hampton, where the pair became lovers for a week, he, too, started writing love poems to Anne. "What Clawson didn't know—and what Sexton never told him—was that the love poems she had laid on the restaurant table during lunch on Long Island had been written in Weston a week or so earlier to another man . . . she had embarked on a passionate affair with her psychiatrist, Dr. Zweizung. . . . In one of his verses he quoted back to her her favorite paradox: 'In poetry, truth is a lie is a truth.'"

There is something sublimely ridiculous and coarsely touching about Sexton's love for her "doctor-daddy," though her best friend's comment was characteristically down-to-earth: "Imagine paying to get laid twice a week!" But, as Kumin added, "Anne always had the notion that she was the most underloved person in the universe. There could never be enough proof that she was loved." At the suggested breakup of her affair with Dr. Ollie, Anne took an overdose, was hospitalized for forty-eight hours, and missed one of those monthly follow-up sessions with Dr. Orne. For all our advances in psychotherapy, you see, we have introduced something into biography that wasn't there in the lives of a Smart, a Clare, a Hölderlin—the element of farce. Even Nerval's walking a lobster on a pink-ribbon leash has an aura of innocent sweetness about it.

But there is nothing sweet about Sexton as she tumbled down the stairs in her house on her birthday—the day she often chose to punish herself—to commemorate Dr. Zweizung's leaving her. Mrs. Z. had discovered their poetic love correspondence—especially galling since it was the good doctor's habit to leave bits of it for his wife to find whenever things between him and Sexton got too hot and heavy. Anne broke her hip, which left her slightly but permanently limping. She wrote a couple of lyrics for her lost



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Ollie, actually recycling some of his images. The better of the two, "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife," ends:

> She is so naked and singular.
> She is the sum of yourself and your dream.
> Climb her like a monument, step after step.
> She is solid.
>
> As for me, I am a water color.
> I wash off.

But the other lyric, "The Break," contains such stuff as "So I fell apart. So I came undone. / Yes. I was like a box of dog bones." And later, in the hospital, ". . . My one dozen roses are dead. // They have ceased to menstruate. They hang / there like little dried up blood clots." The poem ends with "The zeal / of my house doth eat one up." Such deliberately ugly tropes, such uncertain diction reaching for archaism, and, above all, the proud prosaism of short sentences flatly stating the obvious!

It is instructive to follow the development of Anne Sexton's poetry, which all too soon turns into regression. After the first two or three volumes, she proceeded pretty much on automatic pilot. Consider: Sexton's chief mentor, the highly gifted James Wright, left behind an oeuvre of roughly two hundred pages. Sexton's corpus, representing less than two decades, extends to six hundred pages. The affair with Wright took place, typically, against the background of a poetry conference, and was, like so much in Anne's life, sad and funny, touching and ludicrous. In reading the biography, one is constantly moved by the desperation of this woman, and constantly repelled by what seems like monstrous self-indulgence. There is something about Sexton's craziness—perhaps about all craziness—that comes across as willed, self-serving, for effect. It feels calculated to get away with something impermissible to even vaguely normal folk. One reaches out to slap Anne Sexton, then pulls one's hand back in shame.

Further poets fell for her; she had affairs with George Starbuck, the English poet George MacBeth, and more. Others wisely resisted her: W. D. Snodgrass (from whom she learned a lot), Anthony Hecht. Still others—James Dickey, for instance—she herself resisted, only just. But if she got much from the poet lovers she fed on, she got even more from her fans, not always poetry lovers, who fed on her. Sexton, the retiring, frightened, overawed person, became for them one of the most aggressive poetry performers, a grandstander worthy of Yevtushenko and Voznesensky. There is even the curious business of Sexton as a sort of hippie rocker, chanting her works with a group of instrumentalists under the name Anne Sexton and Her Kind. This derives from one of her best poems—perhaps *the* best—"Her Kind." Yet even that short, taut lyric is not entirely free from posturing, from rodomontade.

How she wooed her audience! There are many vivid descriptions in the book of her sundry poetry readings, considered "hammy" even by "Max" Kumin. At one of them, in Indianapolis, a faculty member shouted, "A little less Phyllis Diller, if you please, and a little more Anne Sexton." By the end of her life, she was one of the best-paid poetry performers, modeling her fees on James Dickey's. In real life, though, she was afraid to walk along a sidewalk, and chose her friends among those neighbors whose properties abutted on hers. "On stage," we learn, "she projected a commanding, confident, glamorous physical presence; from her husky voice issued a hint of vulnerability, reinforced throughout the reading by rehearsed breaks and catches." She infuriated W. H. Auden, who had to follow her at a London poetry event, by going well overtime; and she did not endear herself to the English in general by making as if to embrace the audience and blowing it a fat kiss. But one way or another, she made headlines.

She would lie to interviewers. Thus Middlebrook: "Strategic untruthfulness was, of course, an element of her poetry, so perhaps she regarded it as a legitimate characteristic



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of her self-representation." "I am known to lie," she told D. M. Thomas, "and I never let myself down." And, for all her miseries, she could say (ungrammatically, as was her wont), "I had a good life—I wrote unhappy—but I lived to the hilt." Her greatest problem, perhaps, was her difficulties with her daughters, or, more accurately, her daughters' difficulties with her. In a circular relationship, there is grief all around. And the most spectacular aspect of this drama was the occasional episode of incest. One may wonder just what Linda's motives were in making this material public, but I believe that they were honorable: to show the world how disturbed someone can be and still be a dedicated artist.

In short, there were the times when Anne would crawl into Linda's bed for comfort—typical role reversal—and the terrified girl would realize only later that, while she herself slept on her side, her mother was masturbating at her back. This, however, need not constitute absolute proof of incestuous feelings, but can be construed more charitably as group masturbation for one. Sexton, at any rate, was able to make poetry even out of such experiences, as in the not ineffective second stanza of "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator," where "she" and "I" are Anne past and Anne present, and "you" is the faithless lover:

> Finger to finger, now she's mine.
> She's not too far. She's my encounter.
> I beat her like a bell. I recline
> in the bower where you used to mount her.
> You borrowed me on the flowered spread.
> At night, alone, I marry the bed.

The last line, which serves as refrain to the poem's seven stanzas, is typical of Sexton. It is not quite on target and not quite off, not quite poetry and not quite prose—pathetic in both the good and the bad senses of the word.

There was one particularly sordid incident. Kayo was on one of his business trips, and Linda, fifteen, was invited into Anne's big bed to make her mother feel less alone. "They watched television for a while; then Linda fell asleep. In the middle of the night she woke, feeling that she couldn't breathe. It was dark, but she realized that her mother was lying astride her, rubbing against her and kissing her on the mouth. 'I felt suffocated. I remember pulling out of bed and throwing up. Mother followed me into the bathroom, and soothed my head.'" Child abuse, incest, lesbian molestation? All three, if you will. But again: Sexton was preparing her autobiographical play, *Mercy Street*, for production, and was perhaps trying to relive its crucial incidents. She was re-feeling her problems with her father and Nana. Yet even research should only be pushed so far: must a playwright dealing with murder commit it in order to comprehend it?

There was some interesting infighting concerning these revelations (if such they are) in the pages of *The New York Times Book Review*. Running in tandem with Katha Pollitt's thoughtful review of the biography was a compelling article by Linda Gray Sexton, whose fourth novel was recently published, which culminated in the *cri de coeur*, "The only way to transcend the hurt is to tell it all, and to tell it honestly." The following week, Linda's cousins—daughters of Blanche, the one seemingly undamaged Harvey girl—came back with a lengthy letter impugning Anne Sexton's veracity ("products of a prodigiously fertile—and perverse—imagination, without basis in fact") and trying to clear their grandfather and great-great-aunt. But some of their assertions were patently pious whitewashing, and their rage against Linda and Middlebrook further weakened their case. Other letters followed, the most notable one coming from Natania Rosenfeld of Philadelphia, who wrote in part: "Sexton may have been a 'seriously troubled woman,' but what are we to make of the following example, which her nieces choose to illustrate her perversity: 'Anne saw Christmas as a particularly villainous season. Yet her sister Blanche (our mother), growing up in the same household at the same time, saw reindeer on the roof, Santa Claus and ex-



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pressions of love'? *Which sister was insane?*"

This amusing letter fails, of course, to prove Anne sane and Blanche crazy, but it does suggest what relative concepts "sanity" and "insanity" are. More important, it goes to the heart of the question of what is poetry. For poetry is not some strange, highly specialized, even esoteric activity, but something most of us use in varying ways to make sense of life. Young Blanche is just as entitled to reindeers on the roof as middle-aged Anne is to vilifying Santa—"Please God . . . Don't send death in his fat red suit and his ho-ho baritone"; both are poetry, and neither would hold up in court.

None of this, however, can disprove that Sexton was often mad as a hatter, and that dinner at the Sextons was at times like the Mad Hatter's tea party crossed with a Bruegel painting. Here is Linda's account given to Middlebrook:

> Joy and I would be banished during the cocktail hour, while Daddy and Mother absorbed their martinis or whatever. By the time dinner was served at eight or nine o'clock they would be sloshed. The meal was full of tension. And there was just never enough food! Daddy would open one small package of frozen peas, maybe bake those small boiling potatoes, one apiece—no salad, no dessert. Mother would gag down a drumstick. She was hardly able to swallow anything solid; she'd often get up from the table and vomit her food. . . . At the table, Mother was so often crazed; we had to contain it somehow. She'd talk gibberish, she'd stare at the wall, her eyes traveling mechanically up then down in a way my father called "headlighting"—it drove him wild. We'd have to put her to bed. One night she fell straight forward into the mashed potatoes! My father would say, "Anne, stop it, you're frightening the children."

As Middlebrook points out, "the dearth of food had nothing to do with the Sextons' financial situation, as during those same years they ordered champagne by the case. It was a combination of Anne's queasiness about food and neurotic fear of markets —she placed exactly the same order every week by telephone—and Kayo's efforts to cover the bases both at home and at work. . . . During this time, however, Sexton was successful at keeping her disorders private."

This presents us with the fundamental choice: are we to be repelled by Anne Sexton's craziness or are we to be touched by how, despite everything, she kept up appearances? There are plainly two Anne Sextons. There is the sick woman who cannot venture into the street by herself, except to her headshrinker or hairdresser; who must be accompanied even to the bookstore or library, and rehearse ahead of time what she will say; who worries for three weeks in advance about buying her children a pair of shoes; who needs round-the-clock advice and help from family, friends, lovers, strangers—and survives by sheer egocentricity. But there is also the other Sexton, who lives for and in her writing, knows how to publicize herself but does not recoil from dogged work, and can intermittently be a good friend, mother, teacher. And can even make sound sense, as when she tells a feminist professor, "Just remember that women are human first."

But again, this is the woman who keeps going into trances anytime, anywhere, even in the most intimate, romantic situations —in fact, at one time or another with all of her lovers, to their considerable embarrassment or concern. Sometimes she could not be roused from these trances by anyone: therapist, lover, or daughter. And yet she managed to function in some ways and keep teaching, writing, falling in love, having affairs (once even with a woman friend, the psychiatrist Anne Wilder)—anything to keep her poetic juices flowing. It is a strangely bisected life, no sooner inviting than frustrating any clearcut response. When Dr. Orne first asked the twenty-seven-year-old Sexton what she might be good at, she could come up with only one skill: she might make a good prostitute. And in a sense, the poetry he steered her into was to be a kind of prostitution, but not for that without any value, some of it even poetic.



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In the end, it is the poetry that matters. Much has been made, by Middlebrook and others, of a statement in Sexton's memoir about Sylvia Plath: how the two poets agreed that "suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem," which makes it sound as if in the crunch their common sense prevailed. But the same short piece contains two other, rather different and less positive, utterances: "Sylvia and I, such sleep mongers, such death mongers . . ." and "we talked death and this was life to us. . . ." Anything can be grist for poetry, even infatuation with death, as a greater poet than either Plath or Sexton, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, has demonstrated. But the trick is to make poetry come out ahead of neurosis, art ahead of autobiography. Middlebrook quotes John Holmes, Sexton's first poetry teacher, in his subsequent disenchantment: "Not that she has two subjects, mental illness and sex, but that she writes so absolutely selfishly of herself, to bare and shock and confess. Her motives are wrong, artistically, and finally the self-preoccupation comes to be simply damn boring."

The other part of the problem was spotted by James Dickey as early as his review of Sexton's first volume, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960). Here again Middlebrook and others tend to latch on to the wrong passages; in fact, the verses with which Dickey tries to demonstrate that Sexton is writing with an "easy, A-student, superficially exact 'differentness,'" strike me as effective. But otherwise Dickey was quite right—even prophetic about the later work, which was yet to come—that "if there were some way to relieve these poems of the obvious effort of trying to be poems, something very good would emerge." Nevertheless, short stories, which Dickey proposed, proved not to be the answer, though some other form she did not live to achieve might well have been. And I find rather disturbing the way Sexton wrote her poems, typing out the rhyming words, then filling in the lines, again by typewriter, and relying on a rhyming dictionary. Had she lived a little longer or later, it would have been the computer.

Still, a poet who sells as well as Sexton has been selling—and not just to the "I don't read poetry, but I read Anne Sexton" kind of reader mentioned by Middlebrook—deserves our attention, the attention she gets from fellow poets, scholars, critics, and other literate readers. Sexton cannot be dismissed, but she can be disliked. Among the various comments about her by another of her teachers, Robert Lowell, Middlebrook quotes the one in which he compares her to Edgar Lee Masters (praise to faint from), in whose work "little moments prop the big moment." And Lowell continues: "Faults? I don't think they matter. Or perhaps they are unavoidable human limitations—yours! There are loose edges, a certain monotony of tone, a way of writing that sometimes seems to let everything in too easily, bald spots, uninspired moments that roll off disguised by the same certainty of voice, poems that all one can say about is that they are Sexton and therefore precious."

But Middlebrook does not quote a later comment of Lowell's to Ian Hamilton: "[Sexton] is Edna Millay after Snodgrass. She has her bite. She is a popular poet, very first-person, almost first on personality. I had a mortifying revelation. I was reading an anthology and imagined I was reading another poet I often prefer to Sexton. It was marvelous, 'much X's best poem.' I thought X had become unmuddy and personal at last; but the poem was by Anne. Then the poem sank a little, I'm afraid. I knew Anne could be personal. I read her with bias." I quote this remark entire, partly because of what it tells about Lowell, partly because of what it says about Sexton's "confessional" poetry, and partly because of the questions it raises about the nature and worth of a poet's work. What Lowell is saying in effect is that, as birdsong goes, the cuckoo's is not especially beautiful, but it would be stunning if it came out of an elephant. Highly debatable; but, in any case, Millay, Masters—that is not the tournament most poets would wish to compete in.

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ford. She has toiled for ten years over this biography, but sympathy does not cloud her judgment of her subject. (Other things, to be sure, may.) In a review in *Book World*, Joyce Carol Oates praised *Anne Sexton: A Biography* as "informed by at least one guiding principle—that poetry was not Sexton's sickness, but her stay against sickness." True, but not much of a commendation; any biographer who merely recorded the life and ravings of a madwoman for over four hundred pages would cast some doubt on her own sanity. Well researched, decently organized, and readably written as her book is, Mrs. Middlebrook does at times sound—how shall I put it?—worrisome. Thus she writes: "The home, the mental hospital, the body: These are women's places in the social order that appoints different roles to the sexes; and woman herself is the very scene of mutilation, according to the theory of penis envy, which had great currency in Sexton's milieu." Any halfway competent satirist could get a whole essay out of playing with this sentence alone.

But, I reiterate, there were two Anne Sextons, in life as in poetry. Apparently there were two of them even in suicide. Sexton always carried about a sufficient dose of "kill me pills," as she called them, to make a hasty exit from life possible whenever she might choose. Note, however, that she could stage a phony suicide with meretricious theatricality as easily as, when she was ready, commit it with a touching thoroughness, the dedication of a child tucking itself comfily into bed. First the phony one, soon after a fight with her dear friend Maxine Kumin:

> Sexton put on a fancy red dress—one she wore for readings—and told her current tenant [she had divorced Kayo, to his dismay and her ultimate undoing] that she was going dancing. She took a cab to Cambridge and got out a short distance from Linda's dormitory, then strolled down to the Charles River and danced her way along the embankment, wading in and out of the water, until she was across from Barbara Schwartz's office, where Schwartz [a mere psychiatric social worker, Sexton's last resort, her final, female psychiatrist having dropped her, and no other one, apparently, wishing to take her on] always left a light burning, at Sexton's request. Then she began taking handfuls of pills, washing them down with milk from a Thermos bottle she had taken along. A good Samaritan came along [note the inelegance of these two "along"s] and asked if he could help. He took her to the emergency room of Mount Auburn Hospital.

This is almost too perfect: picking the site near Linda's dorm and Schwartz's office, so your death becomes a powerful reproach to both of them; wearing your most elegant clothes, as befits a tragic corpse; behaving conspicuously in a place where there was a good chance of being noticed and saved. (And what of that eternal light that Sexton demanded of Schwartz?) But why milk in the Thermos? Because it reminds you of your childhood into which, with death's help, you hope to regress? Or because milk is good for a suicide's health?

A few months later—on October 4, 1974, in the forty-fifth year of her life—Anne Sexton, this "addict of suicide," did kill herself. She went to see Barbara Schwartz and brought her a poem she had written for her. She seemed utterly calm; the only thing that worried Schwartz was finding Anne's lighter and cigarettes tucked behind a vase: "Anne Sexton without cigarettes was unthinkable." Then Anne joined Maxine Kumin for "a wonderfully gay and silly lunch," as Max recalled, during which she helped Anne correct the galleys of *The Awful Rowing Toward God*. Still, Kumin never felt exploited: "Annie gave as good as she got." Sexton then drove herself home to Weston amid lovely Indian summer weather and foliage. In her kitchen, she had some vodka (not milk!), and phoned her date for the evening to change the hour of their meeting.

She removed her rings and took from the clothes closet her mother's old fur coat. Against the somewhat chill air, the coat, Middlebrook relates, would feel like a familiar embrace, and make death a falling asleep in maternal arms. Carrying another glass of



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vodka, Anne went to her garage, closed the door behind her, sat in the driver's seat of her red, vintage 1967 Cougar, and turned on the ignition and the radio.

Now, that radio is particularly significant. Her mother had once written Anne, "We have always been a two-way radio." When Mary Gray lay dying of cancer in the hospital, Anne guiltily took the portable radio from her mother's room. "Ever after, this radio and its successive incarnations were always playing while she worked at her desk, while she breakfasted, and while she fell asleep at night. [Sleep was never easy for her.] 'I will die with this radio playing—last sounds,' she wrote." This appears on page 47 of Middlebrook's biography; the suicide is on page 397. I hope readers are long enough on memory to connect the two passages. Sexton's suicide was a determined withdrawal into childhood, mother's love, and being sung to sleep.

Touching, of course. Yet this is the woman about whom her husband, fifteen years after her death, told the biographer, "Anne had a mouth like the needle on a Singer sewing machine . . . She had a way of making me the goat." Two Anne Sextons, I repeat one final time: the better one methodical and efficacious about poetry, about becoming a success, about committing suicide. Mrs. Middlebrook does both of them full justice. The only injured party, at times, is the English language. Should a professor of English at Stanford write "submitting two women to torture," "termination from Dr. Zweizung," "Plath's novel aggravated her fiercely," "sex regresses the practitioner," "seventeen long poems comprising *Transformations*," "a masterful poet," "to contact her," "intuited," "critiqued"? Should she write "Macduff" as "MacDuff"? Sexton, of course, would not have cared—she, who had very little formal education, pluralized "wife" as "wifes" and wrote "Society isn't set up for somebody realizing yourself at 28."

But by forty-five and death, Anne Sexton *had* realized herself. She had said, "To be halfway is to be nothing. There is no point in being half a poet." Also: "I have to be great." And, in her small way, she was.

# Assbackwards

*Martin Amis* Time's Arrow, or, The Nature of the Offense. Harmony Books, 168 pages, $18

*reviewed by James Bowman*

It is extremely difficult for art to go beyond or behind "Thou'lt come no more," Lear's cry over dead Cordelia, without insulting our humanity. Artistic representation of suffering tends to become kitsch or worse the instant that it exploits the belief that death is not final, irrevocable, immitigable. Hopeful characters in the drama may express what everyone hopes: that the universe, in some unseen dimension, is indulgent toward the hopes and fears of the dying; but the artist and his art are ultimately bound by what we see, which is that death is "the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns."

That line from *Hamlet* may seem ironic in the context of his father's ghostly apparition, but I think that Hamlet, the theatrical connoisseur, knew better than many of his modern critics that ghostbusting is the stuff of cheap melodrama. He is, among other things, a man of artistic refinement who knows that he is trapped in a popular-formula revenge tragedy. It is Lear's repeated "never"s that set the true tone for tragedy. Or Macduff's reaction to news of the slaughter of his wife and children: "Did Heaven look on and would not take their part?" Art itself is founded on the unanswerability of that question. Heaven remains silent on the subject.

The British *Wunderkind* Martin Amis is naturally less discreet. His latest novel takes on no less a subject than the Holocaust, that swamp where whole armies of novelists have sunk. Hard cases make bad fiction as well as bad law. Amis's justification for marching into this moral morass is that he is not con-



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tent to treat it as a grim finality. Oh dear! I do not go so far—quite—as Julie Burchill did in the London *Spectator* and accuse him of the gross insensitivity of one who would "perform a party trick on a mountain of skulls," but I am afraid that the silliness and triviality of the postmodern school of fiction with which Amis is fitfully associated has rarely been better illustrated.

This is not to deny the cleverness of, or the occasional insight afforded by, the party trick, which is to tell a life backwards. That is, not just the last events first but every detail in reverse, like projecting a film on rewind. The story is told from the point of view of a man's semi-detached soul. As the man is a Nazi doctor who did unspeakable things at Auschwitz we can understand the reason for the soul's detachment. The doctor, *né* Odilo Unverdorben, ends his life (and begins the book) living quietly—as quietly as possible with the name of Tod T. Friendly—as a doctor in America, where he receives intelligence of pursuit or (mostly) lack of it from a lookout called Nicholas Kreditor.

The central conceit allows Amis to have fun with us by writing things like "Somehow, Tod knows this town backward" or "One thing led to another—actually it was more like the other way around." Conversations all take place backwards, and sometimes make a weird kind of sense this way. "Most conversations would make much better sense if you ran them backward" (i.e., forward), says the narrator. "But with this man-woman stuff, you could run them any way you liked—and still get no further forward." The language itself, however, is conveniently righted because the soul/narrator translates it for us—out of gibberish and into a lingo that is unmistakably Martin Amis's.

Here is the novel's major problem: why, among all the mysteries of the universe, should Tod Friendly's spark of the divine speak like Martin Amis? The Amis-soul hangs about in the background of events "like a white bat," as it says at one point, so as to "let darkness have the day." From this vantage point it makes prim, moralizing comments and wonders why the world looks so strange in reverse. Anyone could tell it, of course, but it is important that it be kept in the dark so that its careful descriptions of gathering up groceries, for example, from the garbage and selling them to the supermarket for cash lose none of their ingenuous charm: "What's the trick with money? Money which might as *well* grow on trees. It all comes down to the quality of your trash."

Likewise, taxis are "always there when you need one, even in the rain or when the theaters are closing. They pay you up front, no questions asked. They always know where you're going. They're great. No wonder we stand there, for hours on end, waving goodbye." You can imagine what this innocent makes of a bowel movement. Or vomiting: "The bowl filled with its terrible surprises. Oh, man . . . It seems to me about the most you can ask of the human body." A meal in a restaurant is rounded off with a cocktail, and then we "sit there doggedly describing it to the waiter, with the menus there to jog our memory." Of course he has a field day with sex: "She called me an asshole. I know the signs—when a woman is leading me on."

What fun! And it *is* fun, being led through this wonderland by the wonderfully obtuse Amis-soul, a sort of metaphysical Candide. After a while we get annoyed that it can never see the obvious, that things are moving backwards. "I keep expecting the world to make sense," says the thick *Doppelgänger*. "It doesn't. It won't. Ever." But it is wrong. We begin to see what it cannot, that there is another purpose in the reversal: to make comprehensible what cannot be made comprehensible otherwise.

Of course Jiminy Cricket perks up by the time we get to Auschwitz. Wonderful things happen there. The dead are brought to life. Other souls are "stacked like desperate airplanes circling above an airport." Or like stars, or snowflakes. This "sleet of souls" above the Polish plain is coaxed down to



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earth by the tender solicitude of the Nazi doctors, who animate corpses by the millions and send them on their way. Families are brought together on the station platform:

> At the very moment that the weak and young and old were brought from the Sprinkleroom to the railway station, as good as new, so their menfolk completed the appointed term of labor service and ventured forth to claim them, on the ramp, a trifle disheveled to be sure, but strong and sleek from their regime of hard work and strict diet. As matchmakers, we didn't know the meaning of the word *failure*; on the ramp, stunning successes were as cheap as spit. When the families coalesced, how their hands and eyes would plead for one another, under our indulgent gaze.

All of this is prefaced by the soul's question: "How to explain the divine synchronies of the ramp?" How indeed, you *Dummkopf*! Everything's back to front! Anyone with your moral pretensions who can't see that is in big trouble.

And so is Martin Amis. Constantly he flirts with trivializing the Holocaust, and to what end? It borders on the offensive for the soul to express its distaste for Tod's 1970s flared trousers like this: "I knew then, I think, that Tod's cruelty, his secret, had to do with a central mistake about human bodies." Fashionable legwear somehow implies genocide? Come on! Apart from anything else, where does this ignoramus of a narrator come up with such an idea? It's not that I resent its teasing, or that I am unwilling to suspend my disbelief for its little game; I just don't see the point of it.

Consider: the soul can't see because it's there to remind us that Auschwitz is a back to front world—reading it backward is the only way to understand it—and, obediently, the soul finds that "the world here in Auschwitz has a new habit. It makes sense." The price of this insight is of course that the rest of the world ceases making sense. In the American hospital

> Some guy comes in with a bandage around his head. We don't mess about. We'll soon have that off. He's got a hole in his head. So what do we do? We stick a nail in it. Get the nail—a good rusty one—from the trash or wherever. And lead him out to the Waiting Room where he's allowed to linger and holler for a while before we ferry him back to the night.

"Put simply," the soul finds, "the hospital is an atrocity-producing situation. Atrocity will follow atrocity, unstoppably. As if fresh atrocity were necessary to validate the atrocity that came before." So what? So, if everything is reversed, Auschwitz is good and hospitals are bad? How does this moral tautology put us aesthetically ahead?

Call me a romantic slob, but I am prepared to believe it's something to do with redemption and atonement. Tod Friendly is accused by his housekeeper-*cum*-lover of having no soul; we know that he does. But somehow his life must be rewound in order for him to get it back. The defining event of his life must be literally reversed, and to do that his life itself must be reversed. "Everybody dreams about being harmed. It's easy. Much tougher to recover from the dream of harming." There is some sense in which redemption—buying back—really works like this.

And in spite of ourselves, Amis is occasionally able to move us with the soul's knowing innocence about, for example, Odilo's desperation as a refugee:

> His prayers are like the noise you make to drown out an insupportable thought. I might be impressed and affected by this sudden talent for suffering, if it weren't for its monotony: fear, just fear, fear only. Why? We're all going to make it. Yet with hands clasped he whimpers and gibbers with such desperate ardor for his own preservation, on his knees. To show good faith or to show something, he even tried a thing with . . . you know: the chair, the belt suspended from the rafter. It didn't work, needless to say. As I took the trouble to explain earlier, you can't do that. You can't do that, not once you're here. . . . How heavy it is



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to sit there in the waiting room, on the chair, by the table, with one's penitent perfecto, watching the cankered apples heal.

It is enough like something that is true that it impresses us, this episode; but it is not true. What's safe and done is no more for our comfort than streets of gold in the great beyond. Time's arrow does not leap back into the bow, and the laws of causation move in the direction that they do because reality is a serious business and dangerous to play around with.

Martin Amis's playfulness is like Tod Friendly's flares: something in seemingly trivial bad taste that bespeaks a heavier, moral failing. We are dealing here with a strictly literary device—something on the level of science fiction, a time-travel fantasy in which reality is reinvented for the sake of art instead of the other way around. Wouldn't it be nice—or at least interesting—if this were true? Wouldn't it be nice if evil were reversible? Wouldn't it be nice if the dead were not really dead and could be revived by a literary *deus ex machina*? But because none of these things is true, isn't it, in the end, an insult both to life and to art to pretend that they are?

# Natives of the James family

*R. W. B. Lewis* The Jameses: A Family Narrative. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 696 pages, $35

*reviewed by Donna Rifkind*

The James family inhabited a hopeful moment in American history, a moment when wealth, prominence, autonomy, and talent combined to shape five siblings—William, Henry, Wilky, Bob, and Alice—and challenged them, often at great personal cost, to live up to the privileges which fortune had awarded them. Though two of the clan are known as glorious successes, two as dismal failures, and one, Alice, as a fascinating mix of debility and accomplishment, the family cannot, in any careful consideration, be reduced to such facile classification—as what family ever can?

"Never say you know the last word about any human heart," Henry once wrote, and this is as close to a summary statement about this family as one will ever reach. For every one of the Jameses defied summation, shunned it as a kind of death: complexity, multiformity, accessibility to experience were what they prized above all else. A trust in boundless possibility was the Jameses' birthright, a trust that led a twenty-six-year-old William James to write the following note of cheer to a downcast friend: "Remember when old December's darkness is everywhere about you, that the world is really in every minutest point as full of life as in the most joyous morning you ever lived through; that the sun is whanging down, and the waves dancing, and the gulls skimming down at the mouth of the Amazon, for instance, as freshly as in the first morning of creation."

A sunnier note may never have been written, but William was equally capable of the blackest gloom: his most fearful image, which haunted him during these dark moods, was the memory of a mindless, motionless, uncomprehending epileptic he once saw in an asylum. All of the James siblings were possessed by the same dramatic mood swings, and even by periods of "vastation," or breakdown (they often seemed to be competing in a lifelong marathon of hypochondria), but what is striking is that all of them—and especially Alice, who made a career of it—found their periods of melancholy as intensely interesting and as full of life as their moments of ebullience.

Throughout his new book about the James clan, R. W. B. Lewis highlights "the talent for self-observation that all the Jameses possessed—the ability simultaneously to experience and study one's self experiencing." While Mr. Lewis devotes his book to a narration of the James family in its entirety, with a useful appendix about the



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later generations, we are naturally most interested in the children of Henry and Mary Walsh James, five extraordinary individuals whose superior gifts for observing their own alternating wretchedness and exhilaration are the inspiration for Mr. Lewis's volume.

In 1889, at the age of forty-seven, William described Henry in a letter as follows: "[H]e's really, I won't say a yankee, but a native of the James family, and has no other country." Henry himself described the family as "such a company of characters . . . withal so fused and united and interlocked, that each . . . pleads for preservation."

Preserved the members of this family have been in great detail, by some of the most conscientious scholars our century has produced. The story—its facts and mythologies, its large-scale successes and failures—has been told best in books by Austin Warren, Ralph Barton Perry, Gay Wilson Allen, Leon Edel, Jean Strouse, and Jane Maher. An additional volume in this archive appeared in 1947, when the distinguished scholar F. O. Matthiessen published *The James Family*. With this book, as the author described it, he attempted to present "the biography not of an individual but of a family, and a family of minds." The volume is thus an assortment of primary source materials—letters, autobiographical writings, etc.—by and about each of the Jameses, with Matthiessen's excellent commentary sealing the narrative together.

Mr. Lewis's book owes a great debt to Matthiessen's work. Like Matthiessen, who was Mr. Lewis's teacher and whose influence his former pupil gratefully acknowledges, Mr. Lewis has elected to tell the story as though the family itself were the main character: a single living, moving organism made up of disparate parts. Rather than writing a straightforward biography, then, he has acted as an orchestrator or coordinator of personalities and events, and, in this respect, has proved himself most capable. Whether he has managed to say anything new about the Jameses is another question.

What did it mean to be "a native of the James family"? To answer this one must go back to 1789, when the first of the Jameses emigrated from Ireland to America, a man generally referred to rather majestically as William of Albany. All one really need know about this patriarch is that he amassed a great fortune: his estate was valued at three million dollars, second only, in New York State in the 1830s, to that of John Jacob Astor, and enough to allow him to purchase, among other things, the entire village of Syracuse.

What this impressive wealth meant for William's children was, as his son Henry was said to murmur when informed of his legacy, that they were all "leisured for life." Mr. Lewis offers the theory that, while William of Albany was the last James to be engaged in business for two successive generations, his son Henry and Henry's children were obsessed with the "language and the motifs of the money world," and took pains to translate this language into theology, philosophy, psychology, and literature. So, according to Mr. Lewis, Henry James, Sr., talked of the (to him) deplorable practice in the Presbyterian religion of placing its followers "in a bargaining or huckstering attitude towards God"; while his eldest son William spoke philosophically about "the cash value of ideas" and his novelist son Henry related money to power in tale after psychologically revealing tale.

Mr. Lewis submits this thesis at the very beginning of the book and scarcely refers to it again throughout the seven-hundred-page narrative—a curious thing, since one expects to find the theme elaborated upon in the author's later discussions of William and Henry's work.

For William of Albany's children, at least, the chief importance of money was that they needn't attach any importance to money at all. And so for the fourth of the patriarch's seven sons, Henry James, Sr., being "leisured for life" meant the leisure to spend his days thinking, lecturing, and writing about his own painstakingly wrought personal philosophy—a combination of, among



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much else, the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg and a wholesale rejection of organized religion, specifically the rigid Calvinism under which he was raised. According to Austin Warren, Henry Sr. had "a suspicion of all consistency, of all system, of all which hardens the individual into the type. . . . [His sons] were to cultivate nothing less ample than the universally human."

"Leisured for life" also meant, for Henry Sr., the luxury of living anywhere he pleased. But with this luxury came profound indecision as he tried to determine the perfect environment in which to educate his children. Time and again he would conclude that New York, or London, or Paris, or Geneva, or Newport was the perfect place to provide what he called a "sensuous education," and he would suddenly pick up and move his entire household, along with a variety of servants and often his sister-in-law, from one shore of the Atlantic to the other.

Alice, the youngest James, later complained about this "rootless and accidental childhood," but to Henry Jr. it was the ideal upbringing for a watchful child who wanted above all, as he described it, "just to *be* somewhere—almost anywhere would do—and somehow receive an impression or an accession, feel a relation or a vibration." Bob, who was four years younger than Henry, remembered his early years wistfully as a golden time before the desolation of his adulthood began: "It was a beautiful and splendid childhood for any child to have had," he wrote in his forties, "and I remember it all now as full of indulgence and light and color and hardly a craving unsatisfied."

Henry Sr.'s philosophical aversion to decision-making played a significant part in all the duties of fatherhood, including his role as guidance counselor. In helping his two older sons plan their careers, he had a hostility, as Mr. Lewis puts it, "to *any* final choice," and he applauded heartily as William took up first chemistry, then physiology, medicine, psychology and, finally, philosophy. Mr. Lewis argues convincingly that, for William at least, this paternal attitude did more good than harm: it led, he writes,

> to a philosophy uniquely open to the pragmatics of life; to the *varieties* of human experience, religious and otherwise. It led to a mode of thinking, imagining, and expressing which habitually drew on art *and* chemistry, literature *and* electronics, religion *and* history; not to mention the different English, French, and German ways of organizing experience in language.

In a farewell letter to his father at the time of the old man's death, William wrote: "All my intellectual life I derive from you. . . . What my debt to you is goes beyond all my power of estimating."

Henry, too, acknowledged a debt to his father's intellectual attitude—but of all the children, as Austin Warren has noted, Henry's turn of mind differed most from that of his father's. In deciding to live permanently in London after experimenting with Cambridge, New York, Florence, Rome, and Paris, Henry was choosing among varieties of experience, just as William was choosing among many different fields of science. This master of fictional complexity needed to be surrounded and stimulated by complexity and variety ("I glory in the piling up of complications of every sort," he once wrote to his niece); London allowed him the best opportunity as a novelist to be "an observer in a place where there is most in the world to observe." "But he brought to London," Mr. Lewis points out, "what he himself called a cosmopolitanism, and what his father would have rejoiced to call a universality of outlook."

If Henry Sr.'s influence on William and Henry was a significant part of their success, it must also be said that his behavior toward Wilky and Bob contributed greatly toward their failure. By all accounts, Henry Sr. gave little attention to the careers of his two younger sons, or little compared to what he lavished on those of the two older boys —careers that generated, in William, such ground-breaking works as *Principles of Psy-*



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*chology* and *Pragmatism*, and, in Henry, a succession of literary masterpieces. Throughout their youth Wilky and Bob were offered far less attractive opportunities than their brothers. They were required to attend the abolitionist Sanborn School in Concord, Mass., while William and Henry were permitted to study art with William Morris Hunt at his Newport, Rhode Island, studio; they were urged to enlist at the outbreak of the Civil War, fighting in the renowned black 54th and 55th Massachusetts Regiments, while William studied science at Harvard and Henry, after spending a futile year at Harvard Law School, happily composed stories at the family home in Newport.

After the war, in which Wilky was seriously wounded and Bob's spirit all but crushed, the two struggled together at an ill-fated plantation venture in Florida, where they employed freed black slaves. Bob was miserable there and begged his parents to let him come home and study architecture, but they would not allow it. Meanwhile, William and Henry were permitted to search at their leisure for their perfect milieu. While their careers flourished and made them famous, Wilky and Bob were obliged to settle for humble jobs as railway clerks in Milwaukee.

The two younger brothers had nearly opposite temperaments: Bob was morose, self-pitying, and alcoholic, while Wilky was imprudently plucky. Mr. Lewis stresses this distinction, cautioning that "all too often they have been regarded as virtually indistinguishable, as leading almost identical and equally dismal and defeated lives." Yet the fact remains, as Jane Maher has pointed out, that the parents seemed determined to keep Wilky and Bob together, whether they liked it or not, in order to serve as companions for each other at school, in the war, and, finally, in undistinguished careers. The feelings of inadequacy that this treatment fostered in Bob utterly ruined him, especially as he watched William, the brother whom he most resembled, grow into a supremely productive and contented maturity. In a poignant fragment of autobiography Bob wrote: "I developed such an ability for feeling hurt and wounded that I became quite convinced by the time I was twelve years old that I was a foundling."

As the only female in the ménage, Alice was exempt—and she later soon learned to exempt herself, through illness—from the tournament of success and failure in which her brothers were competing. The limitations of her undefinable lifelong "hysteria" were severe, arising, as Mr. Lewis notes, from "a conflicting interplay of bodily, emotional, and social factors" which could be partially blamed, from Alice's point of view, on "family forces and attitudes"—especially those of her mother, who tended, in Jean Strouse's phrase, toward a "tyrannical selflessness." (Mary Walsh James's role within the family, and her children's complex attitudes toward her, are given interesting if abbreviated treatment in Mr. Lewis's book.)

All the same, Alice exhibited a personality which was every bit as aggressively vibrant, as perceptive about life, as William's and Henry's. In a letter to William of 1891 about her impending death, one can see how the combination of clinical detachment and fascinated self-absorption echoes the spirit of William's own writings:

> It is the most supremely interesting moment in life, the only one in fact, when living seems life, and I count it as the greatest good fortune to have these few months so full of interest and instruction in the knowledge of my approaching death. It is as simple in one's own person as any fact of nature . . .

Like everyone else in her family, Alice spent a great deal of time avidly seeking sensation, and she took her pursuit seriously until the end, collecting impressions about her final illness "with positive glee," according to William. The James family as a treasurable ideal was one of Alice's few compensations for what she called "the poverty of my outside experience," and she had her own carefully developed fictionalization of the family story which appears in full in that remarkable document, her diary.



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Mr. Lewis quotes an extraordinary passage from the diary, written after a reunion in 1889 with Henry and William (the latter of whom she had not seen for five years), after the deaths of her parents had faded to a memory.

> What a strange experience it was [she wrote] to have what had seemed so dead and gone all these years suddenly bloom before one, a flowing oasis in this alien desert, redolent with the exquisite *family* perfume [italics Alice's] of the days gone by, made of the allusions, the memories and the point of view in common, so that my floating-particle sense was lost for an hour or so in the illusion that what is forever shattered had sprung up anew, and existed outside of our memories—where it is forever green!

Yet the ideal of the family was nearly as critical to the others in this company of characters, which was after all, in Henry's words, "fused and united and interlocked." Henry himself, when William was dying in 1910, was despondent at the thought of life without his older brother, who in his youth had seemed to him to be "always round the corner and out of sight," and who since adolescence had been his enthusiastic rival.

"My own fears are of the blackest," Henry wrote at this time, "and at the prospect of losing my wonderful beloved brother out of the world in which, from as far back as in dimmest childhood, I have so yearningly always counted on him, I feel nothing but the abject weakness of grief and even terror." After William died, Henry wrote to Edith Wharton that "My beloved brother's death has cut into me, deep down, even as an absolute mutilation."

In a family whose father's suspicion of all existing systems compelled his children to reject convention and invent their own systems or die trying, there was one traditional structure to which all five children were inextricably attached: the family itself. The various rivalries among them were in every case a competition of similarities more than differences, and their expressions of genuine loyalty toward one another were effusive even at a time when Victorian outpourings of familial devotion were commonplace. An interest in the supernatural, exhibited at various times in later life by William, Henry, and Bob, betrays their secret hopes for a reunion with the family's ghosts; even William, the scientist, could not discount the possibility that "There is *something* back there that shows that minds communicate, even those of the dead with those of the living. . . ."

In 1895, nearly two years after Alice's death, William wrote to Henry: "As the ranks grow thinner, the survivors draw nearer. . . . I feel as if we formed a part of a unity more than I ever have before." What most unified this set of survivors was an immortal interest in life—extending sometimes even to the possibility of an afterlife. Alice's notion of God (a touchy subject, given her father's complicated views) is itself an absorbing comment on the family's dedication to liveliness: to her, God is "a Deity that shapes himself from moment to moment to the need of the votary whose bosom glows with the living, ever clearer knowledge of divine things."

Alice's definition is especially interesting because it seems almost exactly to describe her brother William. Here, from another part of the book, is Mr. Lewis's admiring eulogy of the eldest brother: "William James was temperamentally disposed to regard whatever area of inquiry he was currently involved in as the most significant for him, putting each behind him as he moved on: psychology, religious thought, epistemology, metaphysics. He was invariably multiple and always growing, like the world itself in his vision of it."

"Invariably multiple and always growing"—this could serve as a credo for the James family itself. Mr. Lewis is concerned primarily with fashioning a coherent story out of all this multiplicity and growth ("A Family *Narrative*" is his subtitle), and he does this with considerable efficiency and flair. His book is admirably written, with a



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good balance of attention among all the Jameses, and a balance as well between the family drama and the background of national and world events.

Mr. Lewis's best moments, however, occur during his clever analyses and sharp comparisons of the works of William and Henry. For the truth is that, in this volume at least, his gifts as a critic outshine his talent as a biographer, and the scholarship is far more curatorial than it is investigative—there are no eye-opening revelations here, except perhaps for the ancillary data about the later generations.

Yet even though there is little new information, there are plenty of fresh insights in Mr. Lewis's critical observations: his examinations of the literary qualities in William's scientific works and the psychological principles in Henry's fiction are especially strong. Then again, it would be difficult not to be able to find something new to say about this family and its accomplishments: these are after all people who, in Alice's words about William, "could lend life and charm to a treadmill." Henry once told William that "I never manage to write but a very small fraction of what has originally occurred to me," and everyone who writes about the Jameses must feel this happy frustration to some degree. For the reserves of vitality and interest in them are virtually inexhaustible; and that is what Mr. Lewis's book, coming as it does on the heels of a large body of literature on the subject, most plainly proves.



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Notebook

# Monsieur le comte: a visit with Balthus

*by Philippe Dagen*

On the walls of his grand salon, Balthazar Klossowski de Rola has hung only one of his own drawings—a portrait of an adolescent girl—and none of his paintings. If a visitor (ushered into the grand salon by a Philippine majordomo) didn't know that "monsieur le comte," as he prefers to be called, was really the pseudonymous painter Balthus, he might believe himself to be in the residence of a wealthy lover of antiques. All kinds of antique furniture can be found in the entrance hall and in the grand salon itself—writing desks, sideboards, bookcases. And there are flowers: bouquets of lilacs in the corners of the room and a garden of rhododendrons in front of the house. A pencil study of French marigolds by Delacroix and a lithograph by Bonnard suggest that the inhabitant of this luxurious place has a taste for the fine arts. It pleases him to recall that the supreme insult of Captain Haddock (the crusty old sea captain from the Tintin cartoon series) is: "Artiste!" Balthus takes up for himself this affectation of scorn. He refuses to pose as an artist.

Thus he lives not at all in the manner of a painter, conventionally understood, but in the opulent and quiet style of a world-weary aristocrat. He allows no casualness in his dress; a cashmere scarf is knotted at his neck; he leans on a dark wooden cane encrusted with mother-of-pearl; he comports himself like a successful country gentleman.

Balthus lives secluded with his Japanese wife in a very small Swiss village, not at all a famous place or a resort but a mere collection of farms in a meadow-filled valley enclosed by mountains. These mountains are neither very high nor very steep; you might say that they make for good company, being easy to cross and pleasant to look at.

The chalet Balthus has bought for himself is every bit as astonishing as its splendid location. It is an imposing edifice, all in wood: tall, large, vast. The façade is ornamented with inscriptions in gothic letters; these are carved into the wood and then laid over with black and red paint. When Balthus first became enchanted with this singular old building of woodbeams and boards it was functioning as an inn. He had it carefully restored, taking even greater pains than usual since it is one of Switzerland's oldest chalets, nearly a historic monument.

So that the chalet won't smell of oil and turpentine but rather of lilacs and wax, it is not fitted out with a studio. The studio is on the other side of the road, in what looks like a barn or a cart shed, built of slate and stone. For the stranger, there is no penetrating this domain. If Balthus seems reluctant to hang his finished works in his own house, he is all the more adamant about shielding works from sight that he judges to be still unfinished. Is this the secrecy, the studied reserve, of a painter who feels himself to be

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assured of a place in history but who is still not averse to improving on his legend as an inaccessible, noble master? No doubt.

From this policy of detached unconcern arises the artist's habit of refusing to allow himself to be questioned, of denying access to those who solicit his confidences. At the moment of our greeting he warns me (with an ironic air): "You know, I never give interviews." Pause. "Except today." Is *interview* the right word, or is *monologue*? When a question does not suit the artist, he ignores it. I exhaust myself naming people Balthus has known intimately, from his brother Pierre Klossowski to Antonin Artaud. But the effort is wasted. The painter excels at feigning deafness.

And yet the care Balthus takes not to "lower" himself, his love of secrecy—these are not the only causes of his reticence. Repeatedly, he complains of the difficulty of putting his art into words. "In all dialogue, there is an invisible wall between the two people speaking. As to painting . . . When I try to speak of my own, I soon get lost in a fog. I come up against a total incapacity . . . Painting is a language which cannot be replaced by another language. I don't know what to say about what I paint, really." He closes his eyes, mimicking the gropings of a blind man. "Besides, whatever belongs to craft, color, is only experienced in the act of painting—materially—and is impossible to describe."

Thus he avoids words of a technical kind and is reticent as soon as a question is posed that touches on execution. He complains only of the mediocre quality of the colors used in contemporary painting. His own colors he grinds himself, according to his own recipe; he has a horror of the colors that are bought in tubes at a store. "It is not surprising [that painters should use them]," he says. "The craft of painting has virtually disappeared. There is hardly anyone left who really possesses it. For evidence one has only to look at the painters of this century. The majority of them have nothing to teach; their works contain nothing that is instructive to other painters. The only one who might be an exception is Braque, who had a profound understanding of effects and of materials. There was something of the artisan in him. Indeed, he was the son of an artisan, a painter-decorator who passed along his craft. But other than Braque . . . Of the younger painters, I know only François Rouan who might be considered a truly strong technician."

Balthus confesses to working very slowly, several years on the same painting, up to four years in succession. "I am only able to paint when the light is nearly motionless, a moment that hardly lasts at all. What is worse, I paint more and more slowly because I am hindered by my physical state. I see less and less well. I have been unable to draw for several years now, for lack of visual acuity. With color, I still have my powers. I don't know for how long." For several months he has been working each morning on the third version of a motif to which he has devoted himself for more than ten years: a young girl on a settee with a mirror in her hand. "It's not a series. I simply try to realize something . . . a painting which corresponds to an interior vision that I possess within myself. I try to attain it."

"Interior vision" is a phrase that lends itself to ambiguity. One wonders: Is he trying to portray a dream, some apparition, the troubling image of some obsession? Upon hearing the word "dream"—the first allusion to surrealism—Balthus protests and immediately asserts the principles of his aesthetic. "If there are no longer painters today, fewer and fewer of them in any case, it is because they no longer wish to look at exterior things. They claim to draw what is inside them, in their individual selves, and to make their work that way. This is a mistake. What painter is able to invent, truly invent, anything really interesting? Not one. I remember what Bataille told me: 'When one looks at an object, one destroys it.' When he said this, Giacometti and I responded that, on the contrary, when one looks at an object one remains in some sense 'below' it, below



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its comprehension. I will always find even the worst paintings that attempt some kind of representation better than the best 'invented' paintings."

Thus, Balthus paints from nature—portraits, landscapes, still lifes. But he does not work in these genres to achieve realism, in the vulgar sense of the term. "In my childhood and adolescence," he says, "I looked out the window at the mountains, the snow, the winter. When I encountered Chinese and Japanese painting, I found in it the same vision of nature. It was that which determined my passion for the art of the Far East. Not that I have anything to do with making things seem 'Japanese.' Absolutely not. Rather I discovered in Japanese art a kind of 'community of perception' which has sustained me since I first recognized it. I would not call it an influence. Roland Barthes has defined Japanese art perfectly. He entitled his book *The Empire of Signs.* This is the right word: signs.

"Nevertheless, it is not only the Chinese and the Japanese who have painted in such a way. There are also the Sienese. In reality, there is no difference between the painting of the Far East and that of the Sienese, from the point of view of their philosophy. In the West, a rupture with this view occurred in the Renaissance, when perspective introduced a more 'realistic' conception of representation. That conception is not my own. Moreover, it was not that of Courbet. One calls it 'realistic,' but that's absurd. Of Western painters, Courbet is, with the Sienese and Breughel, one of the very few painters who is in agreement with the Chinese. All have in common the same conception, the Chinese conception of painting, which aims not at the representation of things but at an *identification.* The great Western painting is that which does not 'know' this rupture with the Oriental."

These principles control Balthus's preferences in the art of his own century, preferences which he expresses rather bluntly. He dislikes everything that he calls "American painting": art that is abstract, expressionistic, descended from surrealism. He judges it to be facile and limited. On the work of the abstractionist Hans Arp he offers this judgment: "I, too, would be able to make things as he does—it only requires working blindfolded!"

The case of Matisse is settled just as quickly. "Matisse? I prefer Tintin. It's as simplified, but more amusing!" To justify such a view, he recalls a remark that Gustave Moreau was supposed to have made to Matisse when Matisse was one of his students at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts: "You want to simplify painting," Moreau said. "Moreau was right," adds Balthus. "Matisse simplified too much. He did some magnificent paintings, of course. But I don't like him . . .

"One day, in the Twenties, I accompanied my father to Bonnard's studio. Matisse was there. He spoke in the manner of an officious junior master at school—yes, he truly had *l'air de pion*, Matisse. Suddenly, he said to Bonnard: 'You know, Bonnard, you and I, we are the two greatest painters of our time.' Bonnard was furious; he immediately protested. 'That's an appalling thing to say. You must not say anything like that again . . . If you are right, then it's a great misfortune for us!'

"Bonnard was right. And yet, he . . . He lived then at Vernon, in the valley of the Seine. One day, around the same time, we had gone to take a walk—Bonnard, my father, and me. We returned to Bonnard's house. A servant came to tell him that someone was waiting for him in his studio. It turned out to be a very old man with a long beard. Bonnard turned pale when he recognized Monet. Monet had come from Giverny to see Bonnard's latest pictures. It was a sign. An indication . . ."

In the period between the wars, as he likes to remember, Balthus saw various painters, writers, philosophers, and film makers nearly every day. He mentions three of them: Picasso, Braque, and Derain. Of the first, he recalls (without describing it) a conversation one night at Golfe Juan (near Antibes), in the course of which the painting of Balthus himself came up. "I cannot repeat what he



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[Picasso] said to me. It was too generous." Of the second, Braque, he again celebrates the craftsman's knowledge of materials and pigments. Of Derain, he has more to say. "I have an immense admiration for the man and his culture. For his pictures, well, that's another thing. Derain painted 'from the first throw,' very quickly, with an amazing virtuosity. I was always incapable of making something that way. Even when I was young, when I painted *The Street*, I worked slowly. From this point of view, we never understood each other, Derain and I."

Of his contemporaries, he cites only Alberto Giacometti, to whom he feels bound by a friendship of several decades and by a community of ideas that he readily recalls. "After the war, I returned to Paris, to Saint-Germain-des-Pres, where I was accustomed to meet other painters, poets, everyone . . . I understood immediately that everything had changed. Everything I had known before 1939 was gone for good: the conversations, the encounters, the discussions; nothing of all that was possible anymore. Except with Giacometti. One day, Giacometti and I were walking in this neighborhood; we were looking at the pictures in the galleries. We had been wondering whether we had perhaps turned into a kind of dead end by devoting ourselves to painting from nature. On seeing what the other painters were showing, we felt reassured."

As he evokes this past, he is seized again by what appears to be his fundamental worry: the loss of craft. "There are no longer any painters today. Hardly any. When one compares what today's painters know how to do with what Renoir painted . . . Giacometti and I, we tried to make something despite everything . . . I am still trying; I hope to succeed . . . I live on my hopes, without knowing whether I will ever realize them."

*—translated by Erich Eichman*



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# Letters

## Aestheticism & homosexuality

To the Editors:

Louis Auchincloss's comparison of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde (October 1991) sparked an initial curiosity in this reader by the promise it held out of weighing and contrasting two literary figures often paired by the fact of their having almost exclusively invented and refined the aesthetic movement. However, instead of the just and balanced, not to mention illuminating, analysis I had hoped for, what I found was a heavy-handed, righteous, and extra-literary, that is to say anti-homosexual, essay.

Mr. Auchincloss begins well enough, giving Pater an appreciative and leisurely treatment. His remark that Pater "attempted to sublimate desires unacceptable to society into his art" is neither unreasonable nor offensive. When he expands this remark into a thesis that sublimation and a "monastic existence" helped Pater achieve the "most graceful and mellifluous prose of his day," we are faced with the first warning sign that Mr. Auchincloss means to apply his moral code to purely aesthetic matters. My main point here, however, is that he handles Pater decently, discussing *Marius the Epicurean* and *Sebastian van Storck* in a thorough manner and making his observations on Pater's private life in a discrete and limited fashion. The moment his attention turns to Oscar Wilde, Mr. Auchincloss abandons all literary pretense and indulges in the most personal and sordid attack conceivable. He dismisses Wilde's literary accomplishment by simply enumerating it, and even here he errs since he fails to mention the brilliant epigrams, partially collected in "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young." No attempt is made to probe the nature of Wilde's great critical essays, his dramatic works, his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (rich, by the way, in suggestive allusions concerning the nature of sublimation in art), or the monumental *De Profundis*. Instead we get a character analysis culminating in the loathsome litany of Wilde's moral transgressions: ". . . the boy prostitutes, the bibulous parties in hotel brothels, and even the fecal stains on sheets produced as police evidence of sodomy." And to *this* Mr. Auchincloss adds, "Think what Pater would have thought of the latter!" Think indeed. I know what Pater would have thought. He would have been as disgusted as I was by the insertion of this degrading detail into a purported essay of literary criticism, a detail intended not to shed light on the work of a great writer but to sabotage the writer once and for all, to reduce Wilde to nothing more than a sodomite. Mr. Auchincloss then concludes by saying that Wilde's achievement consists in the "remarkable feat" of having "fused his works with his biography, so that they seem . . . a single work of art. One wonders if either his writings or his purgatory would be quite so famous today without the assistance that each lends the other." To call the incarceration at Reading Gaol a "purgatory" is priceless. Earlier in his essay, Mr. Auchincloss wrote that he had little doubt that Pater's literary triumphs at the expense of his desires brought him "a very intense happiness." I find it emblematic of Mr. Auchincloss's cold, censorious critical style that he can enter into Pater's joy



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while characterizing Wilde's extraordinary suffering as a mere "purgatory." Before the infamous trial and the wretched years in prison Wilde had already managed the "feat" of fusing his work and his life. He was renowned for his brilliant conversation and wit and it was even said that his writings paled in comparison with his talk. He viewed his life as an artistic creation to be shaped and revised in the manner of a literary work. When we read Wilde we see the dream of his existence played out between the lines of the text because we cannot bear to consider that this profound, witty, erudite artist, an artist who had much more yet to give, should have been laid low and crushed by the hypocrisy and cruelty of a society that chose to condemn him for his personal life rather than exalt him for the excellence of his work.

Mr. Auchincloss's essay, notwithstanding its intention, does nothing to demonstrate that in sublimating unacceptable desires Pater created a greater body of work than Wilde. I grant Pater his purity but I do not grant him ascendance over Wilde as a creative genius. The final literary judgment rests with posterity and we continue to read Wilde today because Wilde is the greater artist.

Marcela Breton
Bethel, CT

*Louis Auchincloss replies:*
Marcela Breton might have had less trouble with my piece on Pater and Wilde had the Editors not shortened my original, undoubtedly too long, title, which attempted to make clear that I was addressing myself to an examination of two solutions to the problems of aesthetics and homosexuality in the nineteenth century. I was not writing criticism. Pater and Wilde are acknowledged masters, and I fully agree with Miss Breton's enthusiasm for the latter's work. But for an artist to have his sexual feelings condemned with hatred and scorn by the society he has to live in can be a devastating experience, and it cannot help but affect his work as well as his life. Pater chose the solution of chastity; Wilde that of defiance. The results of their choices in their lives and books were what I was seeking to explore.

Incidentally, Miss Breton finds my description of Reading Gaol as a purgatory "priceless." I suppose she means that the word is inadequate to describe its horrors. She might have preferred the term "hell." But the difference between purgatory and hell is only that purgatory is temporary and hell eternal. As Wilde was in Reading for a finite time, I stand by my term. I suggest that Miss Breton reread the ghost's description of purgatory in *Hamlet*.

## Peter Schjeldahl

To the Editors:
What is it with you people, anyway? The job of defending Western Civ from the barbarians at the gates is a tough one, sure, but that's no excuse for indulging in the kind of viciousness in Roger Kimball's attack on Peter Schjeldahl (November 1991). So what if Schjeldahl is "the scion of a rich Midwestern manufacturing family"? You haven't the faintest idea how often, if ever, he writes home for money instead of getting by on freelancing. Then there's the snide business of putting quotation marks around the word "poems": You can argue the aesthetic merits of Schjeldahl's work all you want, but cut the cheap stuff. It isn't worthy of an "essay" by an "intellectual" in a "cultural" magazine. And there's nothing necessarily wrong with art-world axes with stylistic biases, like Robert Storr's and Schjeldahl's. From what I can tell, you've got a nice little one going over there yourselves, with School of Paris rehashes and certain SoHo co-op galleries. Besides, no one indulges in mutual back-scratching in jacket blurbs (or has book plugs stand in for contributor's notes) quite like the neocons on the *Commentary-New Criterion* circuit.

Whatever Schjeldahl's faults as a critic, better him than some guy who lumps together Robert Rauschenberg and Mike Kelley and consigns an artist such as Jasper Johns to "the roster of improbable marketing triumphs if not, indeed, to the annals of psychopathology." Even your taste should be less retrograde than that.

Peter Plagens
New York, NY



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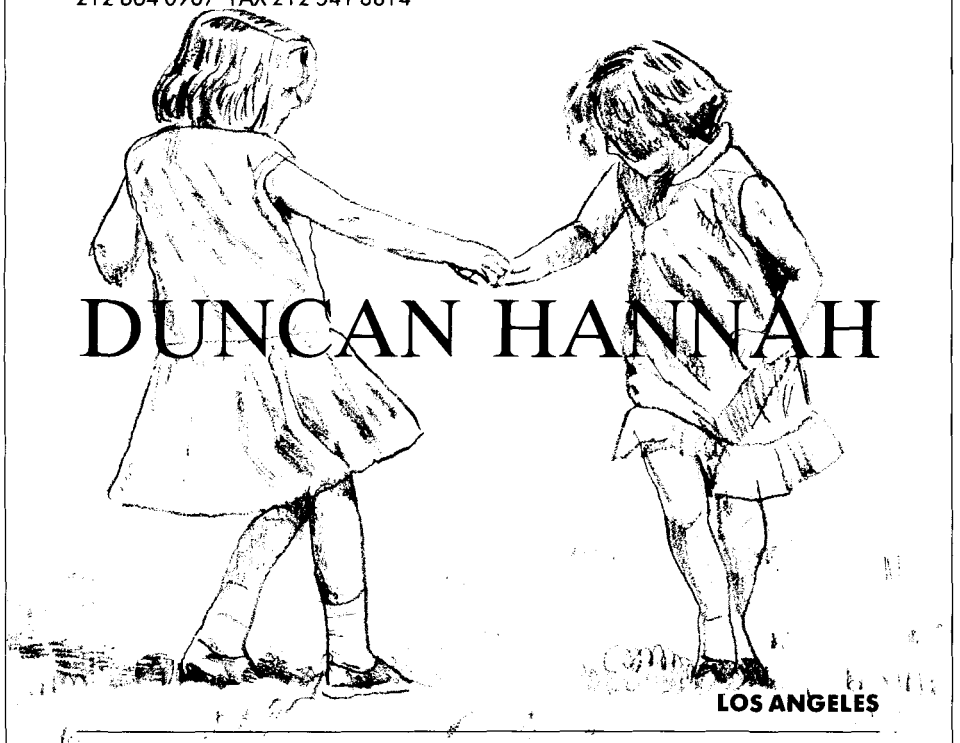

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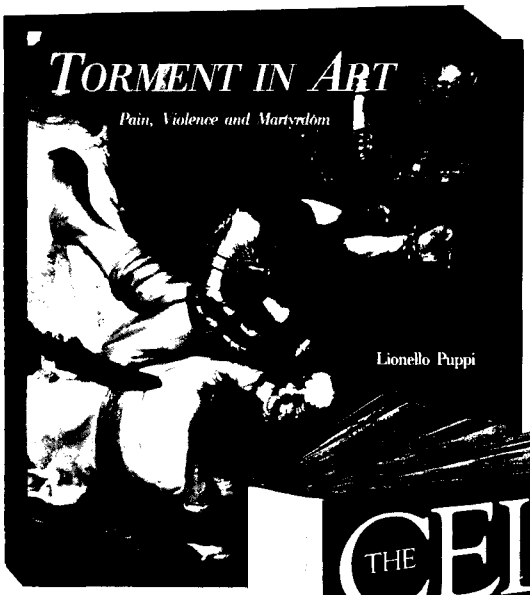


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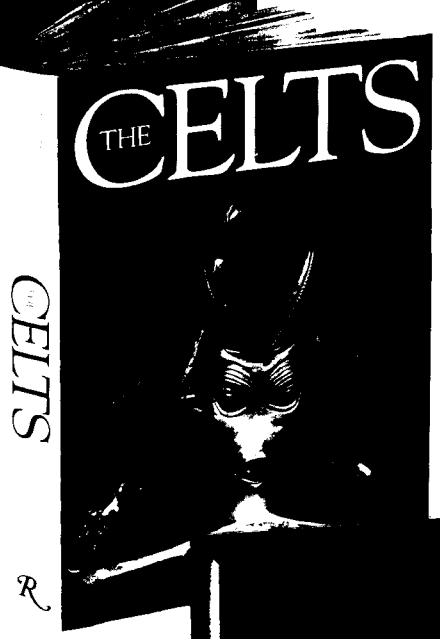


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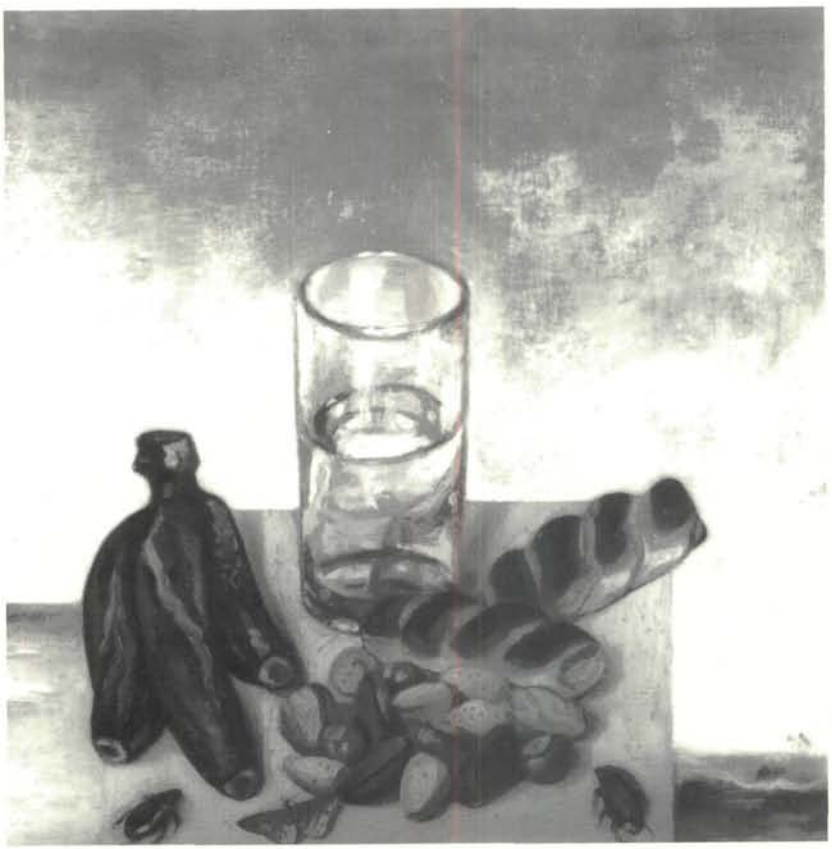

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